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BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH

A Novel

BY

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'FOLLY MORRISON,' 'HONEST DAVIE,' 'FETTERED FOR LIFE,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

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Between Life and Death.

CHAPTER XXXII.

One morning when Sweyn came to see Nessa, he held her wasted hand in his after their customary greeting, and a look of trouble and anxiety came into his eyes as he looked down into her thin face. There was nothing of her, poor little thing! She was not getting on at all. She must be fretting about something, he said to himself. He seated himself, still holding the slight, soft fingers that seemed to cling to his broad palm in mute appeal for help to recover strength.

'Do you sleep well?' he asked in a tone mellowed by sympathy.

'Yes. It seems to me that is all that I can do now,' she replied feebly.

'Down on her luck!' he said to himself; 'no wonder—lying here inactive week after week without change, after such a life of activity and excitement.'

'Mustn't lose heart, Blue and White. Pluck has won you many a race,' he said.

'I don't think it will win me any more.' Her voice quivered as she spoke.

'Oh, that is what troubles you. I've been wondering what it was.'

'No; it does not trouble me now as it did. At first I thought I could not live unless I went back to the arena; but now I think I may live, and yet not wish to run another race. I can think of that life as gone for ever, now, without pain.'

He looked at her in silence, unable to understand this assertion, for her voice, her eyes, her lips belied it by their signs of suffering.

'I have lost heart because I have lost strength—that is all,' she continued, adding with deeper dejection, 'I am only an ordinary girl.'

'Only an ordinary girl,' he repeated to himself. 'There's not such another in the world.'

Then, after a pause, he said aloud: 'It would be an extraordinary creature who didn't lose her courage with her strength—something more than human.'

'No; not more than human,' she answered. 'If I had lived for others, and not for myself—if I had some greater object in my life than the mere gratification of vanity—I should not lose heart. Miss Arnold would never lose courage; it is only we ordinary girls who give in like this.'

'If you were only an ordinary girl you wouldn't say such a thing as that;' involuntarily his hand closed upon her fingers, and

its warmth seemed to be imparted to her and send a thrill through her heart.

He drew in a chair to the bedside and seated himself, rapidly diagnosing her case the while.

'And how long has this been going on?' he asked, when he fixed his eyes again on the pillowed face turned towards him. When did it first occur to you that you were only an ordinary girl?'

'It has been growing upon me gradually since I have been able to think and reason.'

'Not quite so long as that.'

'I cannot tell.'

'I can. These ideas have been growing upon you ever since Mrs. Blount came—not quite a fortnight ago. I could tell you the exact day by looking at my note-book, for I should find there a little mark against your name indicating the appearance of symptoms that I could not account for. I can account for them now, and Mrs. Blount must answer for it.'

'Oh, indeed you are mistaken. She is a dear old soul. She has been most kind to me.'

'She is a kind-hearted old soul, I know, but her tongue leads her into all sorts of indiscretions, and, like most of us, she prides herself on the possession of what she lacks: in her case it's judgment. She has a mother's admiration for the children she has nursed which blinds her to their faults; and as no one can pretend to equal her paragons, you cannot expect to be as good as you should be in her opinion. I dare say she has told you so.'

'She has told me nothing but the truth. Nothing. What am I?' she asked, with an appealing gesture.

'A child with a future yet to be shaped,' he answered gravely. 'What we may become, no one can tell, happily; but it is a step onwards, some assurance of a higher life, to

know what, with Heaven's help, we will not be, and I think you have settled that.'

'Do you think that I may have refined tastes and delicate feeling, and a noble object to live for?'

'The wish for such things is next to the possession. We are blessed or we are cursed as our ardent desires lead us to the good or to the bad. Nothing is beyond hoping for.'

'Oh, it is good to think that!'

'It is the gospel of nature—a gospel applicable as well in physical as in moral cases. It is better than all the physic I can give. Unless you believe it, I hardly see how I am to get you strong and well again.'

'It seems so far away,' Nessa said, after a pause, 'to think that I may be as lovable and good as she.' She was comparing herself with Grace again.

'Not so far away as you think,' he said in a low tone of conviction.

A conflict between hope and fear rendered Nessa silent for some minutes; then she said, in a tone of hesitation:

'I think I could nurse anyone who was nice; but I suppose I ought to be quite as ready to undertake nasty cases?'

'There's no necessity to nurse at all,' he replied, smiling. 'Nurses, like poets, are born, not made. You might go back to the International and be lovable and good there, in spite of doubtful influences.'

Nessa replied with a little movement of her head in dissent.

'It is a question of vocation. We should all do that which we do best. In the humblest station there is scope for noble action. Nothing is needed but the desire to do right, and that desire you have.'

He rose and took her hand again. If it had been a woman's hand, Nessa would have pressed it to her lips in her gratitude.

'You have done me good. I feel so much more hopeful,' she said.

'If you have anything on your mind, it's always best to have it out with a friend: isn't it? Grace could give you a lot of practical advice. I can only lay down the law in a general way, you know. Talk to her as you have talked to me.'

But this was exactly what Nessa could not do. Physical prostration made her take an exaggerated view of her own moral weakness and Miss Arnold's strength, and while she considered herself nothing more than a frivolous, pleasure loving child, she exalted Grace to a position quite beyond that of even the best of women. A great gulf lay between them which, it appeared, could not be crossed without presumption on her part.

It was not entirely Nessa's fault that they stood apart. There was an instinctive repulsion on both sides. With the most earnest

endeavour to efface herself and exercise charity in its broadest meaning, Grace could not overcome certain antipathies due to her birth and the training of early life. She conscientiously sought to beat down the barrier of conventional prejudices which separated the refined and sensitive lady from the public favourite of a vulgar exhibition. She neglected no opportunity of putting herself on the same level with Nessa, and treating her as if they were equal in all respects. Her intentions were sincere, but her kindest words lacked warmth of expression. Her most generous actions showed thought and care rather than the spontaneity which wins love.

But there was something besides social differences—something more than fear—on Nessa's side, and natural prejudice on the part of Miss Arnold, that kept them apart —something as yet unrecognised by either, even in her heart of hearts.

Sweyn could not make out how it was that Grace did not warm towards Nessa. It seemed to him that pity alone should produce an affection for the poor broken girl such as he felt for her. Her lack of generous feeling disappointed him, and irritated him also. He could account readily enough for Nessa's attitude. It was impossible for her to feel any real human affection for one whose immaculate qualities inspired nothing but a chilling awe. But he could find no excuse for Grace, and his feeling of irritation grew stronger as he observed that the constraint in her manner rather increased than diminished as time went on. And as time went on, his visits became more frequent, and he lingered by Nessa's side, Grace herself encouraging him, for it was evident to her that, under his influence, Nessa was making rapid progress to recovery. He seemed to breathe some of his own exuberant gaiety and re-

dundant health into her. By the end of March she was able to rise from her bed and walk into the adjoining sitting-room. And now she no longer dreaded to look in the glass, for her cheek was less hollow, and the colour was coming back to it, and she looked pretty again.

There was no constraint between her and the doctor. They conversed as if they had known each other for many years. Sweyn talked to her as freely as he talked to Grace, and as kindly, but for a few terms of endearment. Nessa scarcely noticed that he called Grace 'dear,' and that he avoided addressing herself by name. He was still her dear friend —the dearest friend she had ever known: nothing more.

They talked on all sorts of subjects—light, everyday matter mostly. Only now and then, when Grace joined in the conversation, it took a somewhat severe tone, and Nessa found it

necessary to think a good deal before committing herself to any expression of opinion; but when Grace withdrew into the next room, the gossip became very lively and pleasant, and Nessa rattled on without any effort whatever. As for the serious consideration of self-sacrifice in a hospital or elsewhere, that seemed to be shelved for the present altogether.

Grace was painfully conscious of her inability to make general conversation light and interesting. She was neither morbid nor severe. It was not her wish to talk about grave subjects.

Alone with Sweyn, she, too, could gossip cheerfully. She enjoyed a good joke, and liked to treat trifles playfully; but somehow the presence of Nessa tied her tongue and made her miserable, with a sense of her own incapacity for genial expansiveness. It grieved her deeply that this was so, and that she could not love Nessa as Nessa deserved

to be loved, that her heart would not expand to her will, but, like a zoophyte, contracted the more when she tried to open it.

It needed a slighter power of observation than hers to perceive that Sweyn and Nessa were more at their ease when she left them. It was a relief also to herself to escape, and so the distance grew greater between them, but by such imperceptible degrees that neither Sweyn nor Nessa noticed it particularly. They might have seen a change in her had they been less happy in themselves. All three were blind, in a certain sense.

There was one person in the house, though, who saw what was going on clearly enough, and with growing dissatisfaction; that person was Mrs. Blount. She lost a good deal of her natural good temper by not being able to speak her mind out on the subject. She went about with her lips pursed tightly up,

as if she feared to open them, lest the truth might come out. Whenever she found anything she might find fault with, she let off her displeasure on that. She grumbled at West Kensington, but she refused to go back to Brixton, though Grace assured her there was no longer any need of her, as Nessa could now almost do without help.

'She's not the only one who needs looking after,' said Mrs. Blount. 'And I only hope I may not be wanted to nuss you. Smile as you like—and I wish it was a happier smile—you are not right. You're thinner than ever, and more serious and sad, and'—with pronounced decision—'you don't laugh natural.'

She was not pleasant with anyone at this time, but she was noticeably less amiably disposed towards Nessa than she had been at her first coming. One afternoon she came into the room, where Nessa was sitting alone, in a particularly ill humour. Nessa could get

no more than a nod or a shake of the head in reply to her observations; yet it was obvious by her manner that she had brought her knitting with the set purpose of staying there.

It had occurred to Nessa, on this very afternoon, that she had never told her friends who she really was, and how she had come to be an equestrienne. It struck her now that they must attribute her reticence to a want of confidence in them, or to her having done something which she was ashamed to reveal. The possibility of being so misunderstood made her cheeks burn, and she resolved that, on the very first occasion, she would tell the whole truth about herself. She expected that Grace would be dreadfully shocked to hear that she had run away from school, and got into trouble with the police at St. John's Wood, and been hunted out of Brighton; but she felt sure that Dr. Meredith—that dear, generous friend—would make allowance for

her ignorance and simplicity, and see that she was not really guilty of dishonesty. And in her heart of hearts she was elated with the hope that he would like her better for knowing that she was well born, and the victim of cruel persecution, and heiress to a large fortune.

This pleasant reflection was brightening her cheeks, when Mrs. Blount broke silence.

'I've *sent* 'em out for a drive,' she said.

Nessa looked up from the page on which her eyes had been resting, whilst her thoughts wandered elsewhere, and, seeing the sun on the window, said she was glad: it was such a lovely afternoon for a drive.

'Yes; but he'd have been sitting in this room, as if it was raining cats and dogs, if I hadn't spoken out,' said the old lady, in a tone of vexation. 'It's the first time I've ever had to tell him what he ought to do. He'd have found it out for himself a month ago.'

Nessa, wondering, looked with wide, inquiring eyes at her companion.

'Oh, I suppose you have not noticed any more than he has.'

'Noticed what?' inquired Nessa.

'That my dear Grace is growing quieter and quieter, more thoughtful, more gentle even than she ever was. You haven't noticed that she don't watch by the window for her sweetheart to come, that she slips away from the room when he is here, that she is growing old-maidish in her ways. I have. And it made my heart ache, when I see 'em through the blinds, as they started off in the pony-chaise, for they didn't look smiling into each other's face; but he looked up at this window, and she looked straight before her, as if she had no lover in the world.'

'Oh, do not they love each other, now?' Nessa asked, with a trembling voice. 'What is the matter?'

'What is the matter?' echoed the old nurse, laying down her knitting. 'Well, my dear, if you don't know—and I will say this, I believe you are innocent—if you don't know, it's my duty to tell you, before things get past mending. You're taking Sweyn's heart away from my poor Grace! He's fallen in love with you—that's what's the matter!'

CHAPTER XXXIII.

It was nearly midnight when Grace, on her return, entered Nessa's room. The lamp was turned low, shedding a feeble glimmer of light on the bed, where the girl lay. A movement of the bed-clothes showed her that Nessa was awake.

'You have come to say "good-night" to me,' said Nessa.

'Yes. It is very late. Did you think I had forgotten you?'

'I couldn't think that, unless I was very stupid. Are you tired?'

'Not at all. We have been to the theatre, and that has charmed away my dulness.'

Nessa could understand now why she had

been dull—why she was brighter and happier than usual. She could perceive and understand many things, her eyes being opened, which previously had passed unheeded.

'Not too tired to talk to me a little while?' she asked. 'I should like to hear about the theatre and your ride.'

'Nothing will please me more than to tell you. Shall I turn the light up?'

Nessa checked her quickly.

'No, no, no! Leave it as it is, dear,' she said; 'it is like the twilight, which is the very best time for gossiping.'

She had been crying, and feared that the light would betray her swollen eyes.

Grace agreed that the half light was pleasant, and seating herself beside the bed described at length the incidents of her favourite drive to Richmond, where they dined, and the subsequent entertainment at the theatre, with an uncustomary vivacity

and freedom from restraint which surprised herself more than it surprised Nessa. She narrated the story of the comedy, described the dresses she had seen, and entered into all those details which interest women—Nessa stimulating the conversation with occasional questions and observations—and ended the pleasant retrospect with a sigh of pleasure. Then, after a pause, she said:

'But I think the drive was the most delightful part of all. I seemed to grow younger the moment we got clear of the houses. The air was so soft and genial. I almost wish you had been in my place.'

'Do you think I shall be able to get out soon?' Nessa asked with hesitation.

'That is the very question I asked as we were coming home. And now I must tell you what your doctor promised: if it is fine to-morrow he will come and take you for a drive.'

'I am so glad.'

'Only for an hour or two for the first time.'

Nessa lay silent for a few moments, then she said :

'Do you think it would take more than an hour or two to go to Brixton ?'

'Oh no ! Less than two hours, certainly. But why should you wish to go to Brixton ? There is nothing but houses all the way.'

'I want to go to Brixton, and I think this is the best time to tell you why,' Nessa replied, speaking carefully, for she felt that the least slip might reveal what she would not for the world that Grace should know. 'Mrs. Blount is going home to-morrow, and she has asked me to stay with her for a little while.'

There was an interval of absolute silence after this that seemed very long to Nessa ; then Grace bending down said, in a low tone of distress :

'My dear Viola, I know I have been very silent and dull lately. I cannot tell why, and I feel that my unkindness is the cause of your going away.'

'No, no, no! Could anyone in all the world be kinder to me than you have been —than you are now?' She raised her arms and drew Grace's cheek down to hers, which was wet with tears; then she said, 'You cannot think now that I want to go away because I have been unhappy here.'

Grace was so touched by this proof of affection that she could do no more than kiss the wet cheek, and Nessa continued, in a broken, whispering voice:

'I am going away because I feel I ought to go, and knowing that you will not ask me to stay, will you? While I was helpless, I could accept your kindness as freely as it was offered; but now that I am able to move about almost without aid—with no more help

than Mrs. Blount can give me—it is quite different, isn't it? I can never repay you for all you have done on my behalf, but I may be able to repay another for what I take.'

Grace would have spoken, but Nessa hurried on with the argument she had prepared while waiting for her friend's return:

'It is not a caprice or a hasty decision arising from foolish pride; it is no more than the feeling of independence which might exist even between two sisters. And there is still another reason: I am keeping you from helping others who need your help more than I do now. It is not right that I should do that.'

'You shall go, dear, if Sweyn will agree to it.'

Nessa thanked her still silently crying, and then after a pause, she said impulsively:

'Let me kiss you again, for I cannot tell you what is in my heart.'

Long after Grace had left her, Nessa lay awake, her mind crowded with a host of turbulent ideas which she had not the will to dispel. Shaped into words, and put in some kind of sequence, her thoughts ran thus: 'He loves me—Sweyn loves me! He seemed to be perfect—a man quite above all men in all respects and all ways—strong and brave and noble, just as he looks, with none of the frailties and faults of others. I thought a man looking so loyal and true, seeming so generous and gentle, could do no wrong. But he has broken faith with poor Grace—abandoning her he has known so long for one he hardly knows at all. He cannot love us both; one cannot cut one's heart in two. No hero ever gave his heart to one and his hand to another. No; he is not a hero. Many men are worthier than he, and I must not admire him, and treasure his words, and listen for his steps, and try to see his face when I

shut my eyes at night with those soft eyes and that sweet smile. Oh! I must never do that again. I don't think anyone is good except Grace. I cannot be good, or I should despise him now, and wish never to see him again in all my life. But I cannot do that yet awhile. Perhaps I shall as I grow stronger, and realize that he is really weak and base. I am sorry; I am sorry. Why can't we be dear friends for ever without any of that other love, as we were at first? I have never wanted him to be more to me than he was then. My feeling is nothing but gratitude and admiration and friendship. And it was because I have never had a real friend before that I valued him so much.

'He must have filled a great space in my heart for me to feel such a void now that he is gone out of it. He took the place of all I had lost by my accident. I ceased to regret the applause of all those spectators when I

had his smile. What have I now to think of? I wonder whether I shall forget him when I go back to the International? Oh, what a pity that he saved me!

'But I ought to have seen this before. What a poor little fool I have been! Grace saw that he was growing fonder of me than of her. I cannot doubt that now. It explains the change in her. I might have seen the change and guessed why it was if I had been well and had my wits about me. It's scarcely an excuse that I did not. But he has not even that extenuation. He is a man more experienced in the world: much older than I.

'Poor Grace! Poor Grace! How she must have suffered! What should I feel if I really loved such a man, and found that he was gradually ceasing to love me, and thinking more of someone else? Oh! it would kill me. I could not live then. I could not kiss that other one as she kissed

me, for I am not good—not good, not good! I don't hate him as I ought to. Happily, I may yet be able to undo the mischief I have caused. He will not see me when I am at Brixton, and little by little he will forget all about me—never wish to see me, never think of me, and to him it will be just as if we had never met. Why am I crying? Why does my heart ache? Oh! I am wicked. How shall I meet him in the morning? I must not be different, or he will suspect the truth. Yet how am I to seem natural, feeling like this?'

The next morning she schooled herself in the part she had to play, and when Sweyn came into the room, she steadied her nerves and held out her hand to him as usual.

'This won't do,' he said, slipping his fingers from her hand to the wrist; 'you're feverish this morning.'

He sat down before her, still holding her hand, and looked in her face.

She had purposely placed her chair with the back to the light and drawn the blinds, and she now tried to meet his eyes and maintain a semblance of composure; but she felt the hot blood in her face, and knew that her smile was unnatural.

'Don't be frightened,' he said; 'I know what you have been thinking about.'

Had he guessed the truth, she asked herself in alarm?

He laid her hand caressingly on the arm of her chair, still looking at her with a smile in his eyes, and continued:

'Next to Grace, I think you are the most conscientious little lady in the world. The moment you learn that you are strong enough to leave the house, you make up your mind to relieve your friends of a possible burden; you lie awake half the night devising some

scheme for paying Mrs. Blount for your board and lodging; and now you are terrified with the notion that I am going to order you to stay here another fortnight. It's all right, my dear little patient: you shall go for your drive this afternoon, and I will leave you with Mrs. Blount and her bandbox at Brixton. There, I know how it is with you,' he added, as Nessa smiled with a sigh of relief; 'though I dare say your symptoms would have put me to my wits' end if I hadn't had five minutes' chat with Grace beforehand. We both agree it will be a good thing for you. You've seen enough of these rooms, and Mrs. Blount is a dear old soul, who will take care of you like a mother when she gets you into her own hands. And I am sure you will feel easier with the notion of being able to pay your way. Fortunately, I think you will be able to do that without bothering your mind about ways and means for some time to come.

Your old friend, Mr. Fergus, wants to settle up with you. He called on me yesterday about it.'

'I don't think he owes me anything. I was paid on the Saturday before——'

'Yes, but unfortunately your engagement did not end on the Saturday; something is due for what followed. That never entered your head, I suppose?'

'I thought you told me that Mrs. Redmond —I mean Mrs. De Vere—had taken all that belonged to me except the clothes you were good enough to have brought here.'

'Yes, she did take everything except compensation for the injury she had inflicted upon you. She didn't wait for that. Fergus is a capital sort of fellow, but not one to be imposed on greatly. He wouldn't be anxious to pay you either unless he felt very sure that he was indebted. The fact is, the International people fear a lawsuit, and will be glad to make

a reasonable payment as some sort of compensation for what you have suffered.'

'Do you think I ought to take anything from them?' she asked.

'Oh, undoubtedly. The only question is how much: now, what would you say?'

He leant back in his chair, enjoying the look of perplexity in the girl's face, and charmed with her unworldly simplicity.

'I cannot say,' she replied, with a despairing shake of the head. 'But if Mr. Fergus thinks it was not my fault, and that I ought to be recompensed, he knows how much he should give me.'

'Well, you see, his position hardly permits him to be an impartial judge on that point. I would rather employ a solicitor to arrange the affair, but that might involve something which you would wish to avoid. You see, Fergus is firmly convinced that it was not an accident; and if he thought we were going to law, it is

probable that he would find Mrs. De Vere and prosecute her for the injury done to the horses as a means of shifting from his own shoulders responsibility for the injury done to you. I do not think he would take this course unless he feared that by employing a solicitor you intended to get ruinous damages. For, in the first place, it is not a thing the International wish to make public; and, in the second, Fergus has too much feeling for you to escape his obligations meanly. We have not talked about this matter, you and I, but I feel pretty sure, from what I have observed in your character, that you have no vindictive feeling against Mrs. De Vere. You would not like Fergus to hunt her down; he'd only be too happy to do it.'

'Oh no, no, no!' Nessa cried, quivering. 'I am sure she did not intend to do it.'

'I think you are right. At first I believed with Fergus, that she had caused the collision

purposely—from some mad prompting of jealousy ; but knowing now as I do that she appropriated nearly all that you gained, I cannot think that even so reckless a passion as jealousy would lead her to such a sacrifice of her own interests, for she must have foreseen, had the intention entered her mind, that the consequences would in all probability be fatal to you.'

To Nessa this charge seemed monstrous. Her own observation had compelled her reluctantly to admit that Mrs. Redmond was selfish and mercenary and ungenerous ; but though she might accept the fact that the woman was not good, she could not conceive her capable of such an enormity.

'Why, she saved my life once!' she said, feeling that this fact alone was conclusive evidence of Mrs. Redmond's innocence.

'Saved your life,' he said, with deep interest in his look and voice as he leant for-

ward, resting his elbows on his knees. Clearly he expected her to confide in him, but she shrank now from encouraging intimacy with the man who was pledged to give all his love to another, feeling as if it were a treachery on her part towards Grace.

'Yes,' she said; 'she saved my life, and I will do nothing to bring trouble upon her.'

'Of course not—if that is the case. We will say no more about a lawyer. Still somebody ought to represent you. It is scarcely an affair that you could settle for yourself, I think. Is there any relative you would like to communicate with?'

'I have no relatives.'

'Then you must fall back on your friends. Which shall it be?'

'I have no friends,' Nessa replied, trying to believe that Sweyn was nothing to her.

'None?' he said, with unmistakable significance in his low, soft voice. 'Not one whom

you may trust to do the very best he can to serve you ?'

'None whose service I have any right to claim.' Her embarrassment was painful, but the man was yet too honest to see the real cause.

'Then you regard me simply as your medical adviser, eh ? and you will desire me to discontinue my visits when you get to Brixton. That's carrying independence to greater lengths than I will agree to. I shall come every day,' he said, with a laugh as he rose to his feet. 'I shall continue my visits till you are convinced that I am'—he took her hand and held it in silence a moment as he looked down with warm affection into her troubled face—'what I pretend to be—something more than your doctor; ever so much more—your friend.'

CHAPTER XXXIV.

'Myrtle Cottage' was the old-fashioned name of Mrs. Blount's old fashioned home in Brixton—a detached eight-roomed house with French windows and a veranda, a half-glazed door in the middle for visitors, a side-door for servants, a flower-bed in front, a lawn behind with a mulberry-tree, and beyond that a strip of kitchen-garden, ending in a run for fowls. The house was as bright as green and white paint, hearth-stoned steps, polished windows, and a burnished brass knocker, bell-pull, and door-handle could make it ; and there was not the ghost of a weed, or a stone out of its place, within the walls that surrounded the freehold property. Altogether it was a model

of gentility for all Brixton to admire, and in the summer-time a perfect oasis in the midst of that desert of bricks and mortar.

Mrs. Blount had sent for a four-wheeled cab the moment it was decided that Nessa might be removed, and getting home quite two hours before her new visitor's arrival, had satisfactorily completed all arrangements for her reception. The maid was in her afternoon cap and white starched apron, with a face as shiny as the door-handle ; in the sitting-room, the dining-room, and Nessa's bedroom fires were burning brightly, with not an unswept cinder on the hearth ; tea-things, with all sorts of delicacies, were laid on a spotless white cloth ; the best copper-kettle was steaming vigorously on the hob ; the canary was shrieking his shrillest ; and Mrs. Blount beamed over all with satisfaction and kindness. Sweyn had brought Nessa in a hansom ; he dismissed the cab and stopped

there. His presence relieved Nessa from the sense of constraint she dreaded in being left alone with Mrs. Blount, for in her weakness she was painfully conscious of a feeling of banishment which she had unwittingly brought upon herself. She had burst into tears, she knew not why, in parting with Grace.

'I'm always crying now; I never used to,' she said to herself.

When she was seated in the cab she said to Sweyn:

'I am afraid you will find me very dull.'

'I can't expect you to be talkative,' he replied quietly. 'Coming into the fresh air after such a long period of confinement must have the effect of liberty upon a prisoner. I will do all the talking; don't trouble yourself even to think.'

And he had chatted the whole way so

pleasantly that she had forgotten herself and her troubles under the charm of listening to his voice. He rattled on at tea-time full of fun and playful humour, so that no one could entertain a serious thought while he was there.

'I do like to hear a man laugh heartily, don't you, my dear?' said Mrs. Blount on returning to the room after closing the front-door upon Sweyn. 'There's something so honest and wholesome about it; it's a good sign, ducky, and something more than most signs, for surely no one could do an unhandsome thing and keep a light heart.'

She had the good taste or the good sense, which is nearly the same thing, to make no further reference to Sweyn; but long after Nessa had gone to bed the good old lady sat with her knitting in her lap, congratulating herself on the step she had taken, and

flattering herself that she was not yet too old to guide these young people into the path of true happiness.

It was natural that Sweyn should come the next day to make sure that Nessa was going on favourably under the new conditions; and Mrs. Blount was far too reasonable to object to his visiting frequently while the matter of compensation was in discussion, for business will justify all sorts of things which were otherwise unwarrantable; but when the affair was quite concluded, and Sweyn continued to drop in with unabated frequency, she felt that it was time for her to speak out and let him know exactly what she thought about his behaviour. It happened, providentially as it seemed to her, that on the day she came to this decision she was alone in the house when Sweyn knocked at the door. She received him with such unusual severity that he took alarm at once.

'Nothing has happened—she isn't worse?' he asked in an anxious undertone.

'Miss Dancaster has gone out for a little walk with Betsy. She is well enough for that. Come in here, Mr. Sweyn; I have something very serious to talk to you about.'

Sweyn followed her into the sitting-room.

'Have those little vagabonds been chalking the gate again?' he asked.

'It's a more serious matter than that on my mind, and one that concerns your happiness quite as much as mine, so you must not mind if I speak very plainly; and you must not be more angry with me than you can help if I say what may be very unpleasant for you to hear.'

He had been lectured so often in that tone on the necessity of wearing flannel and taking care of himself generally that this preamble gave him no anxiety except to keep a grave face.

'Now, first I must speak about Miss Dancaster—a young woman whom I respect very much—far more than ever I thought I could respect a sukkus rider.'

'What about her?' Sweyn asked, raising his head with sudden interest.

'My boy, she is very unhappy,' said the old lady.

'I know she is,' he answered quickly.

'You have found that out.'

'Certainly I have. There is a marked change in her. She is going back again—not physically, for she is undoubtedly stronger than she was, but in a sense of tranquillity and happiness.'

Mrs. Blount answered with an emphatic nod.

'She was bright and lively at Kensington—especially in the latter part of the time there. She seemed quite happy and at ease. Now all that is changed. There is

constraint in her manner ; she is nervous, self-conscious, anxious to appear better than she is.'

'Quite true.'

'If I were not sure that her general health was improved, I should say that Brixton does not agree with her.'

'Rest assured it isn't that. There's no healthier place in the world than Brixton.'

'Then it must be as you say—she is unhappy. But I see no reason for that change. She has not received any visit or letter to cause her uneasiness ?'

'To my certain knowledge, she hasn't seen anyone here, nor had any letters.'

'Then I can't understand it,' he said despondingly.

'I can, Mr. Sweyn,' said the old lady, bringing her hand down flat on the table. 'I saw the beginning of this trouble before you did. It began the night before she left Ken-

sington. I dare say you don't know why she came here.'

'It was some notion of independence, I believe.'

'It was nothing of the kind. She had no narrow motives of the sort, but a generous feeling, that does her the greatest credit. She asked me to take her away from there, for the sake of our dear Grace—asked me to help her because, poor thing! she couldn't help herself. She's an innocent, sweet, noble young creature —that's what she is. She was as unconscious as you are of the harm she was doing to Grace, and that's why she was happy and blithe. Her unhappiness began when she learnt the truth.'

'Harming Grace! What do you mean?' asked Sweyn in bewilderment.

'I mean this, Mr. Sweyn: she learnt that she—unconsciously, I am sure—had been winning your love away from Grace.'

'Good heavens!' exclaimed Sweyn, starting; 'who told her that?'

'Not Grace, you may be sure, though she knew it, dear creature—as you might have seen if you'd had an old woman's eyes in your head—as you will see it plain enough now that you know the truth.'

'Who told her that?' Sweyn repeated.

'I told her,' said Mrs. Blount, with pride in her own courage.

'Then you did a great wrong—a cruel wrong,' said he fiercely, white with suppressed anger.

Mrs. Blount was dismayed—the accuser suddenly finding herself the accused.

'You have done a cruel, a wilfully cruel, thing,' he repeated.

'It is the first time you ever accused me of being cruel,' whimpered the old lady, her pride, courage, and resolution all giving way under this terrible verdict.

'You have been cruel to this poor girl from a mistaken feeling of kindness to me. You believed that I was wantonly amusing myself; that my feeling for Miss Dancaster was an idle fancy, which I should forget when I ceased to see her; and you chose to expose her rather than me to the unhappiness of this knowledge.'

He paused a moment; then, turning upon her, continued:

'If this is a fact that Grace has suffered neglect by my interest in Miss Dancaster, and I have been blind enough not to see it in my thoughtlessness, you ought to have opened my eyes—not hers. By your own showing, she knew nothing of this before you told her—her happiness proves it; she would have known nothing, and been happy still, if you had not told her.'

'You're too hard upon me, my dear, dear Mr. Sweyn—you are indeed. It hasn't gone

so far but that it may be remedied. You've only got to come, say once in three days, and then once a week, and after that once a month; and I warrant you'll get over it by the end of that time, and won't care to come any more.'

'You women would always spare the man!' he said bitterly. 'But how about the girl?'

'Why, my boy, in my young days I had a dozen sweethearts, and forgot 'em all; and we don't know that Miss Dancaster cares for you. Indeed, I think she would hardly presume to think of such a thing.'

'And if she does,' he said, with fierce sarcasm, 'what then? She's only a "circus rider."'

'What am I to do?' asked the poor old lady, melting into tears under her beloved Sweyn's harshness.

Sweyn seemed to have no pity for her—he who never before had looked angrily upon her. He suffered her to whimper in silence as he

walked up and down the little room. He came to a stand at length, and, taking up his hat from the couch, said;

'Do not breathe one word of what has passed between us to Miss Dancaster.'

'Of course I won't, dear. Thank goodness, Grace knows nothing about it.'

'But she must know, and I must tell her,' he replied, going towards the door.

He was going away in anger, without even a word of 'farewell.'

'Sweyn—my boy, Sweyn,' sobbed the old lady, strething out her hands.

He turned round quickly, took her hands in his, and pressed them in forgiveness.

CHAPTER XXXV.

With such remorseful self-questioning as an honest man imposes, in finding that want of foresight and self-restraint may have destroyed the peace of an innocent woman, Sweyn paced up and down the path before Myrtle Cottage, until he caught sight of Nessa and her maid in the distance. Then the flash of joy and tender emotion that thrilled his heart answered the question whether his feeling for Nessa was anything more than professional interest and the permissible affection of a friend. He *did* love her; his heart went out towards her as it had never gone to any other. How graceful, how perfectly beautiful, she looked; and how in harmony with

this lovely face and figure were the heart and soul within her! Surely no man could know her without loving her, he said to himself, as he strode to meet her.

There was a little flush of colour in her cheek, and her eyes were the deeper and more beautiful for the shadow of trouble in them as they met his. The sympathy of a secret sorrow made the man and woman dearer to each other—a sympathy that each strove to conceal as they walked side by side, exchanging the commonplace observations that people drop into under such conditions.

Nessa felt better—very much better for her walk.

'You look almost yourself again,' he said.

'Indeed, there is nothing the matter with me now. I have not had any tonic for a week; and, you see, I am taking exercise without the doctor's orders.'

'Yes, I think you can do without a doctor

now. I am the more pleased,' he added, after a little pause, 'because I purpose going away for some time.'

He cast a quick glance at her, to see what effect this announcement produced. He could not tell whether the expression in her face was one of regret or satisfaction—the one followed the other so quickly.

'You are going away,' she said, with as much indifference as she could assume.

'Yes. I have not seen my brother for a long while—he lives in Devonshire, you know —and he tells me, in a letter that came this morning, his child is ailing, and he would like me to see if I can do any good ; and I think I ought to go.'

'I should be very unhappy if you stayed here on my account, because I can do quite well alone now ; thanks to you and Grace.'

'Yes. I will pack up and be off to-night. But you will write to me if you want me,

either as a doctor or as a friend. Here is the address.' He put his brother's letter in her hand as they stopped before the gate. How quickly they had reached it! 'You promise me that, don't you?'

'I will write if I have any need to write. Are you coming in to see Mrs. Blount?'

'No. I have seen her, and told her I was going. Good-bye!'

'Good-bye!'

And with no further words than that they parted; but there was something in the clasp of their involuntary clinging hands more significant than speech—something which dwelt in their minds long, long after.

She had promised to write to him if she wanted him; but, if she had kept that promise, she would have written to him that night, and again and again, ever more often as time went on. The visits she had partly dreaded she now looked back upon as

we look back upon the days of happiness that can never return.

She knew that he was gone away for good. She suspected the truth : that he had found out his danger, and fled for safety. He was lost to her for ever. She might think of him and love him, now that they were parted; and, though the pain was cruel, she did think of her love for him and of his love for her.

Her life was now quite eventless ; and without occupation — without anything to look forward to—it became intolerably dull. Brixton is not a lively place at any time ; but when the sky is overcast, as it was at this time for many days in succession, and the mud is deep everywhere, it is dreary and dispiriting. And there was nothing in the home life to give a fresh turn to Nessa's thoughts. Mrs. Blount was always the same ; she prided herself upon this invari-

ability. Everything went, in her admirably-ordered household arrangements, with the regularity and precision of a nicely-balanced piece of machinery. It was terribly monotonous and fatiguing to Nessa, who was young, and naturally inclined to variety and change. Mrs. Blount's friends, of course, were chosen for qualities like her own ; and a more respectable, uninteresting set of people never met. Their conversation never extended beyond local topics, servants, ailments, and the weather. There could be no sympathy, or community of ideas and feelings, between them and Nessa. It was known that Nessa had been a 'circus rider,' and she was looked upon with something of awe and suspicion, tempered by pious charity. If Mrs. Blount had harboured a 'black man,' the feeling with regard to him and Nessa would have been much the same. Nothing could make either white, and their

welfare here below depended on a gloomy and sectarian view of things in general.

Grace called sometimes, and spent the afternoon at Myrtle Cottage. Sweyn had told her all before he went away, exciting her deepest respect and admiration for Nessa. But her feeling was purely intellectual. She could not love the girl; the woman within her was too strong for that, and, despite her will, she was jealous of her rival. Nessa, also, was now a woman, and the constraint that existed between them, and could never be overcome, was as much due to her own love for Sweyn as to the human fault in Grace's character. And so there was nothing to give Nessa a zest for life.

One day she went out alone, and, taking a cab, drove to Olympia, and with some return of the old feeling of delight and expectation, she caught sight of the familiar building. The doors were closed. The In-

ternational Company had gone. There was a look of neglect and abandonment in the place that made her heart sink. The rain had soaked the placards on an adjacent hoarding, and some of the more recent posters being stripped down, revealed part of an old parti-coloured bill, on which she distinguished part of the headline, 'Blue and White wins.' She returned to Brixton in deep dejection. 'Who cares for me now?' she asked herself.

There were a few people, however, who constantly thought of her with anxiety, and among those was Mr. Nichols, the money-lender. He was unremitting in his inquiries about her. Whilst her condition was precarious, he contented himself with such scraps of information as were to be picked up at the bar of the canteen; but when it was announced that she was out of danger,

he thought it advisable to put himself to greater expense, with a view to getting a more definite understanding.

'So you're going away from us next week, Mr. Fergus,' he said, buttonholing that gentleman one slack evening towards the end of the season.

'Shut up here on the 30th, and open in Paris on the 6th of April.'

'Well, we'll have a bottle of wine, just to drink you good luck. Try one of these cigars, my dear boy.'

Fergus accepted a cigar, and seated himself; he was always ready to talk 'shop' on those terms.

'I suppose you'll have Miss Dancaster over there, as soon as she can sit in the saddle?'

'No such luck, I'm afraid,' said Fergus, with a sigh, as he cut his cigar.

'Dear me; don't you think she'll ever get over it, then?'

'Oh, she'll get over it all right. Her medical man admits that she's likely to be as well as ever she was in a few weeks; but——' Fergus shook his head slowly.

'You can't agree with him,' suggested Nichols.

Fergus shrugged his shoulders, seeming disinclined to continue the subject, but the sight of the champagne loosened his tongue.

'I've no reason to disagree with his opinion, for I haven't seen the little woman once since she was carried out of this place. Here's luck!' They nodded and drank. 'In fact,' pursued Fergus, warming with the wine, 'I've every reason to believe that he's right; for he wouldn't have let her sign a paper, freeing us from all further responsibility, if she hadn't got past all danger.'

'Had to pay compensation, eh?' asked the Jew, in a low tone.

'Two hundred pounds, besides a handsome fee to the doctor for his services.'

Nichols gave a whistle, and pulled a long face in condolence.

'That's what it's cost us, and I consider we've got off cheap. Got the receipt to-day, and glad to get it.'

'But what makes you think she won't come back to the business?'

'She's found some jolly good friends, and they won't let her.'

'What a pity! what a pity! what a pity!' said Nichols, raising his fat hands.

'That's what I think, when I look at our thin house. But when I think what a dear, nice little lady she is, I can't regret it. She's a lump too good for this life—especially with such a woman for a friend as she found.'

'I know the one you mean. How did they manage to come together—them two?'

'Don't know. Don't know anything about

them. However, she's in good hands now, and I shouldn't be a bit surprised if that young doctor makes her his wife by the way he takes care of her; and I hope he may, for I respect them both—hanged if I don't!'

With this, Fergus rose, tossed off his glass, and with a hurried shake of the hand, left Nichols, and ran off to his duties.

This was great news indeed. If the doctor did marry Nessa, then Mr. Nichols might have to pay quite as much for her life insurance as it was worth. He went home, and wrote at once to the relative in Hamburg, to whom he had sent Mrs. Redmond after the catastrophe, to know if the woman was still staying with her. By return of post, he learnt that Mrs. Redmond, soon after her arrival, had engaged herself as a vocalist in a 'Tingle-Tangle'—a kind of *café chantant* frequented by sailors of all nations—where, in consideration of her lofty bearing, she was known as

the 'Duchess.' Since then she had left Hamburg and gone to Liège, where she was well known in the drinking shops along the riverside as 'La Duchesse de Tingle-Tangle.' Nichols wrote to some of his fraternity in that improvident city, offering ten pounds for an I.O.U., signed by Mr. Redmond, in the possession of the Duchess, and waited the result with the patience of his tribe.

'La Duchesse de Tingle-Tangle,' in a low-necked dress with a very short skirt, had sung her song, and was going round with the plate for contributions from the audience, when a long-nosed youth in the farther corner of the Café des Amis patted the seat by his side, and asked her, in passable English, what she would drink. She accepted the invitation at once, told the seedy *garçon* to bring her a punch, and counting the sous and two-centime pieces with which the not too generous Walloons had rewarded her vocal entertain-

ment, listened to her admirer's compliments. When the conversation took a turn, the young man asked her if she knew an English lady, in the same profession as herself, who was acquainted with a Mr. Redmond, of England. The Duchess ceased to count her coppers, and, looking at the young man with awakened interest, signified that she did know the lady in question; whereupon her companion informed her that he was a bill-discounter, and would give as much as a hundred francs for an I.O.U. signed by Mr. Redmond. The Duchess was badly in want of a hundred francs, but the fact that the paper was in demand was sufficient to make her wary in accepting the price offered for it. She tried in vain to find out why the young man wanted it; his natural shrewdness, and the difficulty of making themselves understood, either in bad French or bad English, made a clear understanding impossible. She promised

to give him an answer next evening ; and the bell having summoned her to the platform to sing her next song, they parted. Later in the evening, a long-nosed, elderly gentleman offered her a drink, and made nearly the same proposal as that of the young man. The Duchess put him off to the next day. Before the close of the performance, a third gentleman with a long nose treated her to punch, and went up as high as one hundred and twenty-five francs in his offer for the I.O.U. He, also, was told to call again ; but, by that time, the Duchess had determined that she would not sell the paper at all, feeling sure that nothing but the death of Nessa could account for this activity on the part of the Jew money-lender. She had nothing in the world but the receipts of the evening, amounting to two francs eighty-two centimes, or she would have started at once to London on the strength of this conviction.

All she could afford was twenty-five centimes for a postage stamp, and this she put on a letter to Nichols, asking for information. He chuckled over the letter, but did not for a moment dream of answering it. Receiving no reply, Mrs. Redmond's conviction was confirmed. Nessa was dead; and Redmond, counting upon her state of poverty, had set the Jew to purchase the I.O.U. for a few pounds. How she got the money it is unnecessary to tell, but, by the end of the week, she had sufficient to pay her fare to London; and on the following Monday morning Nichols had the satisfaction of finding her waiting to see him in his office.

'Bless my soul!' he exclaimed, affecting the utmost surprise; 'whatever has made you come to London?'

'I'll tell you straight,' she replied. 'I've had a dozen offers for that I.O.U.'

'What a lucky woman, to be sure! And

you've got the money, and come back to spend it with me.'

'I'm not such a fool as you think. Catch me parting with it!'

'What! you haven't sold it?'

'Not I. Look here. I hadn't enough to get me decent food, and I was offered two hundred francs for the paper, but I wouldn't take it.'

'Oh, what a pity—what a pity!' he groaned. 'How silly not to take eight pounds, how very silly—and such a fine woman, too!'

'What do you mean?'

'Why, that I.O.U. ain't worth eighteenpence. Redmond ain't got a bit o' shoe to his foot respectable, and never will have, so he ain't likely to buy up his paper; and here's Miss Grahame as lively as a cricket, and going to marry a young doctor well-to-do, who'll see she gets her property safe as sure as justice is to be had for money. Two hundred

francs—eight pound for that bit of paper—and you refused it. Oh, what a silly woman—and so 'andsome!'

'I won't believe it. The girl is dead.' Mrs. Redmond said in desperation.

'My dear lady, go to Somerset House and see for yourself. Bring me a copy of the certificate of her death and I'll pay your expenses—there!'

The woman sank down on a chair, overcome by this last shock.

'I'll do more than that,' he continued; 'if you show me that she is dead, I'll give you ten thousand pounds within twenty-four hours for that I.O.U.'

Suddenly goaded to desperation, she turned upon the money-lender.

'I'll do it yet!' she cried; 'give me some money and tell me where I can find her, and I take my oath——'

He checked her.

'No, my dear lady, never no more. I ain't going to risk any more. I've lost enough. You don't catch me flinging good money after bad. You've lost your chance. Miss Grahame is safe now. She's got a lot of money out of the International people. She's given up the profession, and no one can find out where she lives.' He paused, looking at Mrs. Redmond as if in doubt, and then added decisively, 'No, you couldn't do it. You've got a lot of talent in you, and when you get an idea you ain't wanting in courage to work it out. You're a fine woman—very 'andsome ; but you ain't clever just when you ought to be clever. Very sorry, but I can't afford to give you anything.'

'I'm penniless. I haven't taken food since yesterday morning,' she whimpered.

'Poor dear lady ! Don't take on like that. I've got a tender 'eart and I can't abear to

see ladies crying. There now, if I give you a trifle, will you promise not to ask me for any more?'

She forced herself to accept this degradation, and said 'Yes.'

'Then, there you are. There's half-a-crown for you. But you mustn't come bothering me again—you really mustn't.'

He had calculated exactly the effect of the humiliation he inflicted, and the overthrow of all the false hopes he had led her to entertain. Exasperated to the last degree by his taunts and the consciousness of her own folly and failure, her spirit rose in fierce energy from the prostration which had overcome her. She hungered to retaliate on Nessa—to make her suffer for the injuries she had brought upon herself.

'I'll do it!' she muttered between her set teeth, as, blind with fury, she pushed her way through the crowded street. 'I'll do

it if I hang for it. It's through her I've come down to this; she shall pay for it. Am I to beg in the streets for a crust? Not while she lives!'

CHAPTER XXXVI.

Nessa received a letter. It gave her quite a flutter of excitement, so monotonous and dull was her eventless life at this time; but her heart beat quicker still when she perceived by the postmark that it must be from Dr. Meredith. She opened it with a feeling of hope which it would have been impossible for her to explain, having nothing to hope for. Sweyn enclosed a letter with a couple of lines:

'The enclosed letter,' he wrote, 'comes to you by a roundabout route, as you will see. Don't forget your promise to write to me if you need your doctor and friend.

'Sweyn Meredith.'

The communication was studiously brief. He could scarcely have written less; yet Nessa was not disappointed, and in the pleasure of reading it over and over again quite forgot the enclosure. It was clear she must acknowledge the letter, and feeling that she could think of nothing else until she had written she sat down to the task at once. She wrote the first words that came from her heart:

'Dear Dr. Meredith,

'I thank you for the letter. I think I can never be so ungrateful as to forget your friendship and kindness.

'V. D.'

She also could not say less than this, and she dared not say more, and so, with a sigh of regret, she put up the sheet of paper in an envelope and addressed it to the doctor; after that she went out and posted her letter

with as much care as if the happiness of her life depended on it. This mighty business, with the flood of conjectures and bitter-sweet recollections it brought upon her, so engrossed her thought that only when she got home to Myrtle Cottage and set herself resolutely to think of something else she remembered the enclosed letter.

It was addressed, 'Miss Viola Dancaster, Olympia, West Kensington;' re-addressed, 'J. Fergus, Esq., Hippodrome, Paris;' addressed again, 'Care of Dr. Meredith, Grafton Road, Hammersmith, London;' and finally re-addressed, 'Leston Park, Bartam, Devonshire.'

Opening the letter, Nessa, with awakening curiosity, turned to the signature, and found with surprise that the writer was Maud Redmond. It was dated, 29, Murdock Square, Euston Road, Tuesday, and ran on thus:

'My darling Nessa,

'I do not know whether you are living or dead. For the last week I have been in London seeking you everywhere in a state of mind perfectly indescribable. People turn round and stare after me, thinking I am mad as I go through the streets looking in their faces in the hope of finding your dear features. Indeed, I think I am mad sometimes, and no wonder, seeing the awful state of mind I have suffered since that dreadful night. I must have been mad to run away as I did; but what wonder when Fergus told me I had killed you! Not only Fergus, but everyone else told me to my face that I had killed you intentionally. I own that the fear of being publicly accused of *murdering* my darling friend terrified me, and I ran away to save myself; but I did not realize there was a worse torture than that of being unjustly accused of a dreadful crime. That torture is

the thought that you may be now lying injured for life, helpless and friendless, in a hospital. Time, instead of bringing forgetfulness, only increased my fears, until the torture became so unendurable that I was forced to throw up a lucrative engagement I had obtained in a Belgian family as a teacher of music (where I was greatly respected and treated with the utmost kindness) in order to come here and seek you. For anything I know to the contrary, there may be a warrant out for my arrest, and I may end my miserable days on the scaffold. But that would be preferable to this terrible mental torment, which so unfits me for any occupation that I am absolutely starving, and must seek refuge in the workhouse if I do not meet the demands of my landlady. But miserable as my condition is, I could be happy if I only knew that you were living. I could then find courage to work, and I would do anything—

the most menial work—to provide you with an independent home and some of those comforts which you so generously bestowed upon me when I, alas! was too thoughtless and happy to value them. Yes, I would work my fingers to the bone joyfully to give you relief. I know that my darling Nessa has no cruel suspicion of my action. *You* know, dearest, that I am guiltless—however selfish and unkind I may have seemed at times—of any wish to do you harm. You know that, with all my faults, I am generous at times. When I saw that you were going to lose that race, one of those generous impulses seized me, and I took the outside of the course in order that my darling Nessa should again win. Whatever faults I may have, no one can say I am a fool, and only an idiot could have attempted to injure you in my position; I had everything to lose, and nothing to gain by it. For did you not share all you had

with me, and did I not give up my home, position, and everything else for your sake? But why should I seek to clear myself from such a monstrous charge when I am sure that you would be the last to harbour an unjust thought or ungenerous reflection? No, darling, whether you live or whether you are in that state where all secrets are known, it is all the same; you know that I am innocent—you know that I am to be pitied.

'I shall send this letter to Olympia, in the last hope that it may be forwarded to you if you live. And, oh! for pity's sake write to me if you receive it, and put an end to my agony. Let me come and look at your sweet face once more—let me slave for you—help you in some way, to show how truly I love you, and would repair the chances I have lost. It is the last kindness I ask of you, my darling.

'Your most unhappy

'MAUD REDMOND.'

Mrs. Redmond had not yet risen from her bed in the second-floor-back of 29, Murdock Square—it was not yet mid-day—when her landlady, entering the room without ceremony, jogged her shoulder and said hurriedly :

'Here—get up. The young lady's come Drove up in a hansom.'

'Is she alone?' asked Mrs. Redmond, springing out of bed with blinking eyes.

'Yes. You ain't goin' to have her up here, are you?'

Mrs. Redmond glanced round the room, and shook her head as she huddled on her petticoats.

The place was sufficiently wretched and squalid to excite compassion, but the general effect was not picturesque—not the picture of distress which an experienced stage-manager would set before his audience, and Mrs. Redmond knew her business, and the character of the girl she had to play to, as well as anyone.

The crust of a pork-pie, a beer-jug, and a half-empty tumbler, the remains of last night's supper, stood on the dressing-table with a bottle of hair-wash, a saucer of violet powder, and a paper of rouge. On the table, drawn up for convenience to the side of the bed—was a lamp without a shade, a tray with the remains of the morning's breakfast, a pile of hair-pins, a pack of cards, and some odds and ends of finery.

'I've showed her into the front sitting-room,' said the landlady; 'but she ain't sent away the cab, so you'd better look sharp, my dear. What are you looking for now?'

'My shoes. Look under those things on the chair. That's just the way when you want a thing——'

'You are such a untidy lady. Here, take mine, my dear; they'll do to slip down in.'

'Dip the corner of the towel in the water-

jug. Where's that braided jacket? Never mind; give me the towel. Now look about for that waterproof.'

'Here it is, my dear—all creased up anyhow. You ain't going to put any stuff on your face, are you?'

'Not likely,' replied Mrs. Redmond, as she stood before the glass wiping her face with the towel.

'Mind, you'll have to get some money out of her somehow. You promised me, you know that, when she came——'

'Oh, that's all right. You shall have it right enough. I tell you I can twist her round my finger, and, you see, she's come just as I said she would, and the hansom shows she has got the money. How do I look?' She turned, assuming a wobegone expression.

'Why, you're as good as a play,' chuckled the landlady, with her hand to her mouth.

'You'll do. Run down. You can button your dress on the way.'

Entering the sitting-room where Nessa was sitting by the window, Mrs. Redmond started as if she had seen a wraith, and then tottering forward a few steps she fell on her knees, and stretched out her hands with an imploring cry. Nessa went quickly to her side and put her arms round the woman's neck.

'Nessa, my darling Nessa!' gasped Mrs. Redmond, taking the girl's hand and smothering it with kisses. 'Oh, tell me that you forgive me! No—I will not rise till I know I am forgiven.'

'There is nothing to forgive. You did not mean to hurt me. Oh, I am as sure of that as you yourself must be!'

'Thank Heaven for this!' murmured Mrs. Redmond devoutly, bending her head and clasping her hands. 'But I forsook you when I should have stood by you—think of that.'

'I would rather think of anything else—of how, for instance, you stood by me when I was in greater need. There, do get up. It distresses me a great deal more to see you like this than to think of your running away.'

Mrs. Redmond allowed herself to be comforted, and gradually came round to a state of mind less embarrassing in its effect upon Nessa.

'You have given me strength,' she said faintly; 'in a little while I shall be able to look for work.'

The hollowness of her voice frightened Nessa.

'You were very poor when you wrote to me. Have you had anything to eat to-day?' she asked.

Mrs. Redmond shook her head with a plaintive smile.

'But I had some tea and bread last night,' she murmured gratefully.

'I feared it was so,' said Nessa, 'and have kept the hansom waiting. We will go out and get some dinner.'

'I can't, my darling. I have nothing but the things I stand in. The clothes I brought from Brussels have been taken by the woman of this house for my rent, and I have nothing to redeem them.'

'I have,' said Nessa, eagerly putting her hand in her pocket. 'I am quite rich—see! Mr. Fergus gave me two hundred pounds, and I have brought half of it for you.'

CHAPTER XXXVII.

Twice Grace went to see Nessa, and twice Mrs. Blount, with frigid reserve, informed her that Miss Dancaster had gone out without saying where she was going, or what time she intended to return. On the second occasion, the old lady's manner was so particularly stiff and constrained, that Grace was impelled, partly by feminine curiosity, partly by a better and higher motive, to seek an explanation.

'Viola was out when I called last Wednesday,' she began.

'You are quite right, my dear: she was,' replied the old lady, drawing herself up, and assuming the rigidity of a sphinx.

'Do you think I should find her at home to-morrow, if I call?'

'It's not at all likely, unless you leave word that you intend to come.'

'Perhaps these fine afternoons tempt her to go out. If I come in the evening——'

'You would be still less likely to find her. How do you like your new occupation, my love?'

'Never mind about that. I want to talk about Viola.'

'I don't,' said Mrs. Blount emphatically. 'Indeed, I would very much rather not.'

'Do you mind telling me why you object to talking about her?'

'Yes, my dear; I will. It's no business of mine: that's why. While Miss Viola does not make a scandal in the neighbourhood, and comes home before twelve, I do not mind waiting up till then; though, of course, I should very much prefer going to

bed at regular hours ; but I will not consent to letting the key go out of the house, for, whatever you young people nowadays may think, I do not consider it respectable for young women to have unlimited liberty, and I'm sure I should be more fidgety than I am, sitting up listening to the ticking of the clock, with the dreadful things you read of in the papers every day——'

'But, surely,' said Grace, checking the endless parenthesis, 'Viola does not stay out every night without giving you some reason ?'

'I will not say it is every night, but it is too often, in my opinion ; and as for Viola, she never offers one ; and, as I say, it's no business of mine to inquire. I've had a lesson that I shan't forget. No, as long as I live, I shall remember how cruelly Sweyn scolded me for doing what I considered best in the interest of that young lady. I lie

awake and think of his words now with an aching heart.'

'We must not consider our own sufferings, dear, when we have to choose between doing our duty and neglecting it. I am sure you would not hesitate, if you saw that you really ought to interest yourself in—in my welfare if I were concerned.'

Mrs. Blount resisted this appeal for a minute, sitting silent and motionless as a marble, with her lips pursed up, and inflexible resolution in her spectacled eyes; and then her chin twitched, her lids fell, her body unbent, and, taking the gentle hand Grace had laid upon her arm, she turned towards her, with a shake of the head, and said:

'My love, I'm afraid I'm behind the times, and don't understand young people of the present day. In my time they were easy to manage. One only had to be firm with

'em and they yielded. But now it seems that firmness only makes 'em more perverse ; and more than once I've felt, as you make me feel now, that perhaps I have done just what I wished to prevent in being firm with this young girl. I do indeed !'

'I don't quite understand what it is you fear.'

'My love, I fear that Miss Viola has found bad acquaintances, and is being led astray.'

'Why do you think she has bad acquaintances ?'

'Because she has never told me one word about 'em. I've made her afraid of me : that's what I've done ; and she don't dare to tell me all, as she might if I had been kinder and less stern with her. I will not allow, though, that it's all my fault. She doesn't make any advances ; or if she does, they don't last. She isn't the gentle, patient little soul she was when I first nursed her.

She's changed, my love, and is growing impatient and hard—wonderful hard—for such a young girl.'

'I did not notice any change in her when we met last.'

'No, deary; that was three weeks ago. All the change has taken place since, which makes me more sure than ever that she's got some wicked companions.'

'Can you tell me when the change first began?'

'That I can to a day. It began on the Thursday as you were here on the Wednesday. She got a letter that morning—the first she has ever received, and who it was from I know no more than the dead. But as soon as she'd got it she sat down and wrote, and then went out, saying not a word to me, but looking wonderfully happy. Then she came in, and in less than ten minutes out she went again, and never

came back till the evening. And I remember quite well when I put a few questions to her, she replied in her old, pleasant way: "Don't ask me what has happened, for I cannot tell you, dear," which, of course, put me out a little. She went out again the next day, and did not come home till nigh midnight. And, do you know, love'—here Mrs. Blount dropped her voice to a whisper—'I think she must have had some very strong excitement, for she was quite wild, almost as if she had been—well, I must say it—as if she had been drinking.'

'Oh! I can't think that,' said Grace, greatly shocked.

'Well, I don't know, my dear, but I've seen her frequently since then like that, quite wild with excitement; and the next morning her eyes red, as if she had been crying, and looking ashamed of herself—ashamed to look me in the face; then, suddenly leaving

the table, she runs up to her room, and there she walks up and down, up and down, for ever so long, as I can hear quite plain ; and then, just as suddenly, she comes down dressed, and goes out quick without a word.'

Grace sat perplexed, astonished, and deeply grieved—seeking some satisfactory explanation.

'Do you think she has found an engagement?' she suggested.

'What, play-acting or horse-riding? No, lovey! I thought it might be that. But it can't be ; for some nights she won't go out at all, and others she comes home at quite respectable hours, which she couldn't if she was in a theatre or a sukkus, could she?'

Grace gave up that hope with a shake of the head.

'No, deary ; it's bad company, I'm sure,' Mrs. Blount continued. 'And I think she's been drove to it by having nothing to do.

and finding Brixton more lonely than she, with her lively disposition, could possibly endure. I've seen her trying to fix herself on a book, but the leaves didn't turn over ; and she can't settle down to a bit of needle-work ; and at last, she don't seem able to bear it any longer, and goes off ; which does put me out, my notions being that a girl *ought* to settle down, as I have hinted again and again to no purpose.'

Grace assented to this. She began to understand how the dreary, eventless routine drove the unhappy girl to temptation.

'It can't go on for long,' Mrs. Blount pursued ; 'for she's spending her money as if she had thousands. Always comes home in a hansom ; and as for dress—come here, lovey.'

Grace followed the old lady upstairs into Nessa's room with a qualm of conscience, and, looking round, saw many articles of

dress thrown carelessly on the bed and chairs, which her woman's eye saw at a glance were made with a reckless disregard to expense.

'Surely these have not all been made within three weeks,' she said.

'Every one of 'em, lovey. This, and that, are not a week old. And look at that hat, and this mantle—what could they have cost? I always thought *you* were a little extravagant in dress, my dear; but not to such a degree. And look at these little leather cases: they must be bracelets, and rings and things. There's silk stockings in the drawer—I'll show you.'

'No, no!' Grace said, checking her, ashamed of allowing her curiosity to lead her so far; 'I've seen quite enough—too much.'

Suddenly her eyes, in travelling round the room, fell on a large bouquet. She pointed to it with an exclamation of delight.

'Oh yes—that's the third this week,' said Mrs. Blount; 'flowers are very nice, but I don't like to see such bowpots as those in a young girl's room—anyway, a young girl of her station. I'm surprised it pleases you.'

'But, don't you see,' said Grace, finding at last a happy explanation, 'a woman would never buy such flowers for herself?'

'No, that's a sure thing. But I don't see what you are driving at, deary.'

'Why, that explains all. Someone has fallen in love with her, and she dresses to please him, and goes out to meet him; and she may not like to talk about him to you.'

Grace had her own reasons for joy in this conclusion. But Mrs. Blount discountenanced it with a slow shake of the head and a depression of the angles of her lips.

'No, my dear; if she'd got a sweetheart, she wouldn't cry in the morning—she wouldn't go out as if she was forced to it

by her own despair; and she wouldn't be silent about it. No girl in love can ever conceal her pleasure—she must talk about her sweetheart—that is,' she added, lowering her voice, 'if her sweetheart is a good fellow, and she really loves him.'

There was a terrible suggestiveness in these words that made Grace shrink with a nameless fear for the poor girl. With that fear the real truth dawned upon her, and realizing the truth she recognised the duty that lay before her.

She left Mrs. Blount almost abruptly, and from the nearest post-office she despatched the following telegram to Sweyn:

'Come at once. You are needed.'

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

Nessa was dressing to go out the next morning, when the maid knocked at her door, and said :

'Please, miss, will you come into the sitting-room, missis says, before you go out?'

'Yes, I will come,' Nessa answered; 'almost directly.'

Mrs. Blount had told her briefly the night before, when she came in, that Grace had called in the afternoon to see her, and now she expected to be scolded for coming home late, perhaps to be told she must go away on account of her irregularities.

'I can't help it,' she said to herself with a sigh ; 'I ought to go. I'm not fit to stay

here now. Perhaps she has told Grace. I wonder what *she* thinks of me.'

She went downstairs, painfully conscious of her faults, and hoping that Mrs. Blount would forgive her, so that they might part without ill-feeling. The sitting-room door was partly open; she entered, closed the door, and, turning to the table where Mrs. Blount invariably stationed herself on serious occasions, she started with an exclamation of astonishment. Sweyn was before her!

For a couple of moments they stood silent and still, facing each other, and marking the change a few weeks had produced. But her wonder was greater than his, for Grace had prepared him for what he saw, while she was ignorant of the struggle which had exhausted him. The boyish gaiety was gone from his face, the carelessness from his manner; he looked quite old and severe, despite the soft-

ness in his deep eyes. She could only attribute this change to present displeasure, as she accounted for his presence by supposing that Mrs. Blount had written to him, complaining of her misbehaviour.

'You have come to scold me,' she said, in a tone of contrition.

'Yes—partly,' he answered, but there was no anger in his voice; and taking both her hands in his, he held them as if he meant to keep them for ever, looking into her eyes the while with such tender earnestness and deep solicitude that her heart fluttered with a wild, uncontrollable joy.

'Don't you think I ought to scold you?' he asked, after a moment's pause, still holding her hands in his.

'I have done wrong,' she said. 'Mrs. Blount has been very kind to me, and I have tried her patience shamefully; and instead of asking her to pardon me, I have

been silent and morose, not treating her as a friend at all.'

'Is she the only one you have failed to treat as a friend? Have you kept your promise to me? Why didn't you write to me and say, "I want your advice"?'

'But I am quite well now. There is nothing the matter with my health.'

'Ah, you will think of me only as your doctor. Well, as your doctor, let me assure myself that I can do nothing for you. Sit down—no, not there, with your back to the light; here, where I may see your face.'

He seated her, and, still holding her hands, stood before her, looking down.

'Your eyes are sunk, your cheek is thin; there are signs of suffering, pain, fatigue about your mouth,' he said.

'It is fatigue. I went to the theatre last night, and after that I had supper. It was very late when I came home.'

'Yes. It was nearly one when you put out your light.'

'You have heard all about me.'

'No, not all. There is something I want you to tell me. I know that you have been seeking happiness and found but a very poor substitute for it. I know that, poor as the substitute is, it makes you for a time forget some great trouble; but I can only guess what that trouble is, and I must make sure of it before I dare to prescribe a remedy.'

She trembled under his fixed gaze.

'You don't know how dull it is here,' she pleaded.

'Yes, I do. I know that this house must be terribly dull in comparison with the glitter and movement of the scenes you have lived in —that the life here must be terribly monotonous after an existence of perpetual change and variety.'

'And then I am only a girl, with no serious object in life——'

'If you were a man with the most serious purpose a man can have—the determination to subdue inclination and renounce the dearest desire of his heart—the result would have been the same. If a quiet life had been the cause of your unhappiness, you should have found happiness in this last change. But are you happy?' She kept her head down, making no sign. 'No; you have not found even satisfaction. We cannot buy happiness—we can only buy pleasures, and they are scarcely better than the narcotics that for a little while make us forget, and, like narcotics, these pleasures must be taken by those whose happiness depends upon them in stronger and stronger doses till the end comes. Look at Goldy in the cage there. If external conditions count for anything, he should have died of misery the day after he was taken

from the fields. But he lives and sings there in a prison.'

'And why can't I?'

'The case is different. That little prisoner has all the food he needs, but our craving hearts wish for the nourishment that is denied us. It seems to me that we need nothing here but love. I think I could live content with all this small room holds.'

'You are a man,' Nessa said, still striving to hold her ground.

'And, for that reason, I am less easy to satisfy than you who are a woman. There's not the difference between us that you imagine. Look up in my face. Do you see no change—no trace of past suffering?'

She looked up quickly, and, with tender sympathy overcoming her silence, said:

'Have you been ill?'

'Not more than you who tell me you are well. But I have suffered as you have,

though I am a man, though my surroundings have not been dull — living out of doors among men, at home amidst a bevy of noisy children ; and though I have had a serious purpose ever before me, I have suffered in spite of all these influences to forgetfulness until my endurance can go no further. Dear one, you know the cause. I love you, and all my happiness depends upon your loving me.'

Her head had sunk again. He waited a moment, and then continued :

'I know your suffering and mine spring from the same cause, but whether you love me or another I dare not say. I have only my hope to guide me. Give me a sign that I may know.'

He loosened her hands ; they slid down into her lap heavily.

'A word—a sign—to tell me that you love me or love me not,' he urged passionately.

She thought of Grace, and started to her feet, white, and trembling violently. She must not stay there, feeling as she did unequal to the conflict.

'You must not leave me like this!' he cried, taking her by the arm, as she made a quick terrified step towards the door. 'For God's sake, put me out of this suspense! Oh, you do love me, darling?'

For a moment she stood irresolute, swayed between principle and passion, and then, her fervent love throwing all conscientious scruples to the wind, she flung her arms about his neck and sank with a cry of joy upon his breast.

He kissed her cold cheek till the hot blood rose, murmuring incoherent words of passionate love. Then again the image of Grace rose before Nessa's eyes, freezing her heart with a sense of guilt and shame.

'No, no!' she cried, shrinking from his

lips, and freeing herself by physical effort from his arms. 'I am nothing. It is Grace you must love.'

'It is you I love—you, who are all the world to me. And now that I know you love, me no one on earth shall separate us.'

She shook her head wildly and escaped from the room. He left the house almost immediately after. To tell Grace what had happened was the first duty that presented itself to his mind.

It was less easy for Nessa to determine the course she had to take. For a time it was impossible for her to compose her thoughts into any definite form. She shook from head to foot as she sat upon the side of her bed endeavouring to overcome the convulsive agitation of mind and body. Little by little, as the physical and mental agitation subsided, certain convictions rose distinct and clear from the tumult of ideas that crowded her

mind. First, she saw the impossibility of her becoming Sweyn's wife. Her whole soul revolted against an act which seemed to her a deliberate crime against Grace. Next, she perceived the necessity of severing all communion with Sweyn.

But how was that to be done? She had, in the madness of a moment, acknowledged that she loved him. She knew that she loved, and must still love him, despite this great fault in his character. She could not hope to turn him from her by reasoning. She was no match for him. He might produce arguments that would sap all her best intentions. She felt that, if he took her in his arms and breathed upon her face again, she must yield as she had yielded. He would return. How could she escape him? She saw only one way of escaping temptation: she must fly. That, too, was obvious. She must leave the house and never return to it.

But would he be thwarted—he, a man strong and powerful in all things? Would he not find her in her retreat and compel her to be his wife? She foresaw that he would do so. What barrier could she place between herself and him? Why, there was one simple enough: she might marry Lord Carickbairn.

Mrs. Redmond had introduced him to her at the theatre where they met. Since then Mrs. Redmond had found means to bring them together again and again. In her state of apathy and self-abandonment she had listened to his overtures and Mrs. Redmond's insidious suggestions unmoved — accepting the possibility that she might have to become his wife merely as a means of procuring the pleasures which her means would soon fail to provide. It was another step downwards; but surely if it had been almost a matter of indifference whether she took it or not before,

it was a justifiable and a welcome step now that it was to save herself from lifelong shame, and Sweyn from lasting remorse, and Grace from such hopeless misery as she herself now endured.

All that remained of her money, save a few shillings, she enclosed in an envelope with a few lines addressed to Mrs. Blount, expressing her regret for all the trouble she had given, and begging her to accept the sum in payment of her board and lodging; then she took a last look round the room, ran noiselessly down the stairs, and left the house unobserved.

About the same time, from her lodgings in Mabel Grove, Brompton, Mrs. Redmond set out for the restaurant in Regent Street, where they were to meet and lunch with Lord Carickbairn. It struck one as she reached the Chandos. She could be punctual when

it suited her. At the door she was met by a man in a clerical hat and frock-coat.

'You alone?' she said in surprise, giving her hand, and on his nodding gloomily, she asked, 'Are they upstairs?'

'I don't know whether she is. I haven't been up to see. I've been looking out for you. Come up the street; got something to say.'

They walked towards the Circus briskly and in silence for twenty yards; then Mrs. Redmond spoke:

'Where's Carickbairn?'

'At home in a strait-waistcoat,' he replied, in a low tone of discontent.

'What?'

'Attack came on in the night. I thought it would. Didn't you see how queer he looked at supper?'

'I noticed you kept your eye on him, and were precious particular about the knives.'

'I can generally tell within a few hours when he's going to be bad.'

'Oh, well, you can tell her that he's sprained his ankle, or something. She won't mind. She's not ready for it yet, and it's no good frightening her by being in a hurry; she might suspect. It will be time enough when her money runs out and she feels the want of it. I suppose he'll be all right to-morrow or the day after, and a day or two won't make much difference to us.'

'Won't it though!' said he sullenly. 'The governor's coming back.'

'What?'

'Hexham will be back this afternoon. I found a telegram from him when I got in last night. He started from Dublin yesterday evening.'

Mrs. Redmond muttered an imprecation between her set teeth, and after a pause asked, in a tone of dismay:

'What are we to do now?'

'Nothing; the game's up! You may lay your life Hexham won't give us a chance.'

'Why not? Couldn't he stand in with us? If we go equal shares all three in the money we shan't do badly.'

The man laughed at her.

'You don't know what you're talking about,' he said. 'Why, Hexham's as honest as the day. He'd never have been trusted to take care of Carickbairn otherwise. If he chose to be dishonest he could bolt safely with more than you could offer him for putting his hand to such a dangerous job as this. He'd break every bone in my body if I hinted such a thing to him.'

'Well, something must be done,' she said.

'Then you'll have to look sharp about it; he'll be in London by five.'

'Where is Carickbairn now?' she asked, after a long pause.

'In his rooms. I left him strapped down.'

'Look here!' said she, taking his arm and speaking low, 'I'll undertake to bring the girl into the room in a couple of hours if you'll shut 'em in together, and—and leave a knife where he can get at it!'

'Well, you are a devil!' he muttered, glancing at her sidelong.

'Never mind what I am; will you do it? You get as much as I do; you made your own terms, and knew what they were for. Will you do it?'

'What's the good? The paroxysm's over by this time. He'll be as helpless as a child when I get back.'

'Everything's against us,' she said bitterly; then, exasperated by the man's silence, she cried, 'Why don't you suggest something? You didn't leave him to see me for nothing, I know.'

'Oh, I'm content to throw up the affair.

It's not a nice business, and too confounded risky. Hexham pays me well; and a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.'

'That's all very fine. I know you—you want to put all the responsibility on my shoulders; but you are just as loth as I am to throw up the chance of making a fortune in a day.'

'Well, I thought there might be just a chance that you had brought the girl up to the scratch. As I tell you, after this bout Carickbairn may be as easily led as a child. We've had everything ready for the last week. If we could only get the girl to consent, we might put them in a train and pack them off to the Continent before Hexham arrives.'

Mrs. Redmond stopped suddenly, and, turning round, said:

'Let's go back to the restaurant and find her.'

CHAPTER XXXIX.

A GLAZED door with a gauze blind closed the entrance from the staircase to the private dining-room of the Chandos Restaurant. Peeping over the top of the blind, Mrs. Redmond saw Nessa seated at a table. She turned, and by a sign bade her companion in the clerical dress look. The girl sat in an attitude of deep dejection, looking listlessly through the window at her side; the light falling on her face revealed an expression of apathy and weariness in it which encouraged their hopes.

'You leave her to me. It's our last chance, and we may as well try it. Go and fetch

Carickbairn, and bring enough money to pay their fare ; I have none.'

The man turned and went downstairs ; Mrs. Redmond entered the dining-room.

'They haven't come yet,' she said, after kissing Nessa. 'Oh, well, we won't wait. What shall we have ?'

She touched the bell.

'Whatever you choose. It's all the same to me,' said Nessa.

The waiter came in, and Mrs. Redmond ordered soup, cutlets, and a bottle of Moselle.

'It's no use dreaming of anything but the simplest of things in these beastly English places,' she said, seating herself opposite Nessa ; 'and then it's doubtful if you'll get them decent. Now, in Brussels, or anywhere on the Continent, it's quite another thing. Even at a second-rate place like the Rocher de Cancale, for instance, you may go in fagged out with a long journey, and get

a lunch that makes you gay for the rest of the day.'

'I suppose it's very nice in Brussels—everything,' said Nessa, looking up with a gleam of interest in her eye.

'Nice! why, it's a paradise in comparison with this murky hole. Here's a wretched day for you, and we're half-way through May. A couple of inches of mud in the streets—I suppose we ought to be grateful that it isn't snow. It never surprises me to hear of people throwing themselves in the river.'

Nessa shuddered: she perhaps had thought of such an escape from the misery of living.

'What's the matter, chummie?' asked Mrs. Redmond; 'you look more down on your luck than usual to-day.'

'I wish we were in Brussels,' said Nessa.

'So do I, by George! It's a lovely little place. Music in the park, lots of smartly-dressed women and children, people sitting

outside the cafés in the warm sunshine, lots of lovely old buildings, with a market-place in the middle full of flowers, peasants in great wooden shoes and queer dresses, dogs trotting along drawing carts full of bright brass milk-cans! Oh, it is quaint and lovely!'

She clasped her hands and threw up her eyes, and a faint smile came into Nessa's face with the odd picture this description presented to her imagination.

'It must be interesting,' she said.

'Interesting! I should think it was! Why, chummie, it's a thing to make you forget every trouble you ever had. Couldn't we run over there for a week or two?'

'I have no money left.'

'Tut, tut! There, that's it. I haven't a couple of pounds in the world. It's all gone; and I can't tell how. I'm sure we've been as careful as we could; we have bought nothing that wasn't absolutely necessary to ladies in

our position. Do you really mean you have nothing left ?'

'Yes. I don't think I've more than enough to pay for our lunch.'

'Is it possible ? Why, what are we to do, chummie, for subsistence ? I positively dare not run into debt again. Do you think you could borrow anything from your friends ?'

Nessa shook her head. It was almost a satisfaction to her to think that there was no alternative left; and Mrs. Redmond could scarcely conceal her exultation.

'Well, one thing is very certain,' she said; 'I must not think of brighter skies. I must accept that engagement, and go drabbling about the provinces with that beastly low music-hall company. You wouldn't care for that sort of thing, would you ?'

Nessa shook her head as she drew together the crumbs on the table-cloth.

'Of course you must do something for

yourself if your friends won't help you ; but, luckily for you, you're not bound to accept such a degrading position as mine. You've only got to say a word, and you can get all that money can buy—carriages, horses, dress, diamonds—everything. Ah,' with a shake of her head, 'fancy ! in a couple of hours you could be dashing down to Queenboro in a saloon carriage, get on board one of those lovely boats with the sea sparkling round you, and the soft breeze blowing all the gloom out of your mind, steam up that beautiful river to Flushing, and to-morrow morning be lounging under an awning on one of those delicious Rhine boats, passing through the most gorgeous scenery in the world, with some new object of interest at every turn to give delight to life. There, dear, it's impossible to think of any unpleasantness under such conditions, and everything about you seems perfectly charming.'

Mrs. Redmond continued to dilate upon the delights of Continental travel until her imagination and recollections were exhausted, encouraged to the utmost by the evident interest with which Nessa listened. At length, fatigued by the effort and impatient of Nessa's silence, she said, in a tone of irritation :

'I can't tell what you're about to refuse such a chance. I suppose you've got some babyish romantic attachment.' She waited for a response, but Nessa made none. 'I thought so,' she said, with growing vexation at the failure of her eloquence. 'You've been awfully close about your friends; but I can see well enough what's the matter. You're smitten with some fellow whom you hope to catch.'

Nessa shook her head.

'Well, you expect to find someone better than Carickbairn—a duke, perhaps.'

Nessa shook her head once more without any sign of resenting Mrs. Redmond's sarcasm.

'Then I can't understand why you hesitate. I should have thought you had had enough of misery.'

'It may be that is why I do hesitate. If I could only love Carickbairn——'

'I don't see why you shouldn't love him; he can give you everything that women of our class marry for. You talk about love as if you were still a child at school. It's just those matches that result from such silly sentiment that turn out bad. I never knew any couple yet who married for love who didn't detest each other before a year was ended. Can't you use your eyes? Look down in the street there; can you pick out a single well-dressed woman who looks as if she were in love? Not one: they have all found that the real enjoyment of life comes

from dress and position and all that. Love is an amusement—it lasts at the outside for a year or so; but wealth brings enjoyment for a whole lifetime. What would become of us after forty if we had nothing but love to live upon?'

'Oh, we must love as long as we live; it is part of our life,' said Nessa fervently. 'Do not old people weep when death parts them from those they love?'

'That's affection; and it's precisely that affection which springs up after marriage when two people have married sensibly, and not married from inclination.'

As Nessa seemed to accept this proposition, Mrs. Redmond continued:

'A woman must come to love a man who is always providing her with what she wants.'

'But the man must love too—and if love only springs from receiving, and the wife gives nothing——' Nessa suggested.

'But a wife does give something—she gives herself. What more could a man ask for? Besides, men are different from women—they like giving.'

'So do women, surely?'

Mrs. Redmond, judging her sex by her own standard, was not so convinced on this head, but she was quite ready to grant it for the sake of argument.

'Well, there you are!' said she; 'if both give, both must love. And the more you give, the more you ought to love. And, of course, in giving yourself to Carickbairn, you *do* give more than if he were quite the man of your choice. No one denies that he is a little weak in his intellect, and requires someone to guide him; but in taking care of him, and making some sacrifice with a sort of philanthropic notion—a kind of feeling that you are making him happy——'

Mrs. Redmond checked herself, for she was

being carried by the force of her own logic to lengths that appeared to her a little too ridiculous to impose even on such a simpleton as Nessa. But she certainly would have continued had she known what hopeful conviction she had caused to dawn upon the girl's mind. As it was, she leant back in her chair and folded her arms in morose silence, saying to herself that it was no good going any further; she must give up the attempt to mould the stubborn girl to her purpose.

Both sat quite silent for some minutes; then Nessa looking up, with a set resolve in her clear eyes, said:

'How long would it take to arrange for a marriage?'

'Oh, the arrangements are all made. When we first began to talk about this affair, I felt so sure you intended to do the sensible thing that I told Carickbairn to give the formal notice at the registry office in his parish; and it was

done. Why, dear chummie !'—Mrs. Redmond leant forward, warmed with a sudden rush of affection—'you could be married this very afternoon if you liked!'

'Then I will be married this afternoon,' said Nessa firmly.

CHAPTER XL.

It was done. The forms were all duly observed, and Vanessa Grahame was legally married to Richard Anderson, Lord Carickbairn, at the registry office of North Chelsea, before the registrar, and in the presence of his clerk and two witnesses—John Cummings and Maud Redmond.

'That's a queer lot!' said the registrar, returning to the inner office after closing the door on the marriage party. 'What do *you* make of 'em?' he asked, addressing his clerk.

'Something wrong going on there.'

'That's my opinion.'

'Not one of 'em looked quite right. Did you notice the bride?'

'She looked as white as a ghost—never smiled once: I saw that.'

'I mean, when she sat down to sign her name, she stopped for quite half a minute with the pen in her hand, with a kind of wild look in her face, as if she couldn't bring herself to do it. Did you see it?'

'No; the man fixed me. There was a rum look in his face if you like—a hungry look—and his eyes all puffed up and bloodshot.

'Drink, I suppose?'

'Either he'd been drinking, or else he'd just risen from a sick-bed. He could hardly walk across the office; and that parson fellow, Cummings, actually had to tell him how to spell his own name. Look at his signature!'

'Hum! I thought I heard one of them call him Lord Carickbairn, or something like that.'

'I shouldn't be surprised. 26, Eaton Street: is that all right?'

'Oh, he's had lodgings there three weeks—for the sake of the notice, I expect?'

The registrar looked at the register a minute in silence, and then said:

'I tell you what I think: this is a put-up job. Anderson is some young swell with a lot of money—a lord as likely as not—and a dipsomaniac, I should say; and the young girl has been led on to marry him by the fat woman and the parson, who stand in to share the plunder. I didn't like the look of either of them—too managing.'

'They looked anxious enough till it was all over, and then they seemed to have a load off their mind. How precious eager they were to get off, too!'

'They wouldn't have been married here—a young couple of that kind—if it had been all right, you may be sure. However, that's not my affair.

'They're a queer lot, anyhow.'

The 'queer lot' went to Sloane Square Station in the cab which had brought them from Regent Street to the registry office. A train was leaving the platform as they descended the stairs : another was due in seven minutes. With his arm linked in Nessa's, Carickbairn tottered to a seat, and sat down. She, too, thought that he had been drinking ; but overcoming her instinctive repugnance, she seated herself by his side, with the firm resolve to do her duty by the man she had taken for her husband. For a few moments they sat in silence : she with bent head and downcast eyes summoning her fortitude, and striving, with all the strong purpose of her earnest disposition, to do what was right ; he holding her arm with feverish energy, and casting his furtive glance from her to Cummings, who was walking with Mrs. Redmond at a little distance apart.

'I am your wife now,' Nessa said in a low

tone, still looking down ; 'and I will try to make you well and strong and happy.'

'Yes ! yes !' he answered quickly, scarcely above a whisper ; 'I shall be strong enough to-morrow, strong enough when we get away from him.'

He nodded towards Cummings, and tightened his hold upon her arm.

Cummings, walking away from them, carried a small Gladstone bag in one hand, and the tickets he had procured at the booking-office in the other.

'Take these tickets,' said he, 'and I'll give you the money for the others.'

Mrs. Redmond took the tickets, and finding but three, said in quick alarm :

'You're coming too ?'

'No, I shall quit you here.'

'What, and leave me to go on alone with them !'

'Yes ; you'll get out at Blackfriars. It's

only a stone's-throw to St. Paul's Station. You can take a growler to the terminus at Holborn Viaduct if you prefer it. There's sure to be a Continental train at about six.'

'You'll have to come with us. I won't do it alone.'

'You must. It's nearly four. I shall have to meet Hexham at Euston.'

'What for?'

'To put him off the scent.'

'Rubbish! I'm not going to trust myself for a couple of hours with that fellow.'

'What are you afraid of?'

'Why, he may break out and do it in the carriage before we get to Blackfriars.'

'Nonsense! You can see for yourself that he's as helpless as a baby. Besides, he's reasonable enough now, and more cunning than the pair of us. He knows that he will have her all to himself in a few hours, and he'll wait his opportunity.'

'You can say what you like, I won't trust him. If you don't go on I won't.'

'Well, how about Hexham?'

'Let him find out that you're gone when he gets to the rooms. There will be nothing odd in that.'

'Yes, there will; his telegram is on the table telling me to expect him.'

'Well, nothing's to be gained by alarming him before the time. It's just as easy to say that Carickbairn gave you the slip at four, and that you have been hunting for him since, as—any other lie. Besides, what does it matter? He's bound to find out the truth. You've got nothing to gain from him. You've staked everything on getting your share of the girl's fortune, and you'll be a fool indeed if you neglect any means of making that sure. Here comes the train; are we to go on or not?'

'Have it your own way; but mind, it will

be your fault if we fail. The first thing Hexham will do when he finds us gone, and learns that Carickbairn was bad last night, will be to go to the police-station. Better let me leave you here and put him on a wrong track. Shall I or not?'

The train came to a stand.

'No,' answered Mrs. Redmond decisively.

Cummings nodded with an air of resignation, and stepped into the carriage after Nessa and her husband. Mrs. Redmond followed.

At St. Paul's they found that the Queenboro' train did not leave before 8.30.

It was now too late for Cummings to attempt to intercept Hexham at Euston.

They went to an hotel in the neighbourhood and dined. As the time went on, Cummings grew more and more restless and uneasy—glancing with apprehension at every newcomer who entered the dining-room. At

seven o'clock he could no longer endure inaction, and proposed that they should go to the Viaduct station, where possibly they could put Nessa and Carickbairn in the train. Mrs. Redmond, as impatient and apprehensive as he, assented to the proposal.

'A nice thing for me if I'd been alone with them,' muttered Mrs. Redmond as she and Cummings followed Nessa and her husband through the booking-office.

'If I had gone as I wished—and I was a fool not to go—you'd have had nothing to fear,' growled Cummings in reply. 'I should have had Hexham miles out of London by now. As it is, he may be in this very station for all we can tell. Is that the Queenboro' train on the right there?' he asked of a porter.

'Oh no, sir. Queenboro' train, 8.30; they won't make it up for an hour yet, sir. Any luggage, sir?'

'No. Let me know as soon as the train is up. You'll find me in the smoking-room of the hotel.'

'Very good, sir; I won't forget—smoking-room of the hotel'—he touched his hat. 'That's a rum 'un,' he added behind his hand to a couple of ticket-collectors standing near, as Cummings and his party withdrew. 'Four passengers for the Continental express, and no luggage.'

Cummings, going in advance, found the smoking-room empty, and held the door for the rest to pass in. They took a corner table. The waiter brought coffee, cigarettes, and some illustrated papers. Nessa, seated beside her husband, who kept his hand constantly on her arm, tried to interest him in the engravings and find new occupations to her thoughts. For beyond the consideration of the grave responsibilities involved in the irrevocable step she had taken, a certain uneasi-

ness was taking possession of her which owed its origin to trifles that seemed too insignificant to deserve attention at such a time.

At the present moment, for instance, she noticed that her husband, bending over the paper as if to look at the pictures, had his eyes covertly fixed on Cummings, while the fingers of his left hand, as it hung over his knee below the table, were constantly opening and closing, as if he were clutching an imaginary object; and again she observed that whenever the door opened Cummings and Mrs. Redmond invariably turned to see who it was that entered.

Cummings, lighting a cigarette, seated himself on a lounge a little way from the table. Mrs. Redmond rose, took a time-table from an adjacent sideboard, and seated herself beside him.

'What on earth did you come up here for?'

she asked in an undertone, looking in the book.

'Better than sitting in the waiting-room, where we could be spotted by anyone passing through. It's the first place we should be looked for.'

'We might have escaped notice amongst a lot of people. We are conspicuous sitting alone in this ghastly big room. Better have stayed at the hotel, where——'

She stopped abruptly as the door opened, and a man in the dress of a railway police-officer looked round the room with knitted brows till his eyes rested on them, when he withdrew and went off with a business-like step.

'Who's that?' she cried in alarm.

'Oh, bother!' he replied impatiently. 'What's the good of fidgeting? You'll make me as nervous as yourself if you go on like this.'

There was a pause. Then she whispered without moving her head :

'Carickbairn keeps looking over at us. What's the matter with him?'

'Nothing. He's watching his opportunities: that's all.'

'It mustn't happen here.'

'He won't attempt it while I'm in sight. He'll wait till they're quite alone.'

'Do you think he'll do it before they get to Queenboro'?'

He nodded. She rested content with this for five minutes ; then she asked :

'Is that his bag you've got there?'

'Yes.'

'What's inside?'

'His razors.'

At last the porter came to say that the train was in and the booking-office open. Cummings took up the bag, and they went down into the station. Mrs. Redmond left

them to get the tickets, and rejoined them at the wicket.

'Only two going on?' said the collector, examining the tickets.

'Only two,' answered Cummings. 'This lady and I will go on the platform to see our friends off.'

'All right, sir.'

They went down the platform.

'What class?' asked the guard.

'First.'

Cummings, falling back and putting his hand in his pocket, told the guard in a low tone that the lady and gentleman going on were a newly-married couple.

'All right, sir,' said the obliging official; 'I'll take care they keep the compartment to themselves.'

He took the half-crown Cummings had ready, and locked the door on Nessa and her husband.

'Hope you'll have a nice journey, dear,' said Mrs. Redmond, through the window; 'mind you write to-morrow and let me know how you are getting on.'

She nodded and fell back. Cummings stepped forward and shook hands with Carickbairn.

'Good-bye. Pleasant journey,' he said; and then, putting the bag through, 'Here's your traps. Send the rest on. You'll find your shaving tackle in there.'

Carickbairn, taking the bag on his knees, spread his hands over it as he nodded—his eyes shifting from Cummings to Nessa, and then back to Cummings with a gleam of intense gratification.

It was half-past five when Hexham found on the table in his room the telegram he had sent to Cummings intimating his return, and desiring him to be at home

when he arrived. He rang the bell at once.

'Where's Mr. Cummings?' he asked sharply, when the servant came up.

'He went out about two o'clock, sir, with Lord Carickbairn.'

'Did he leave any message?'

'No, sir.'

'Did anyone call for them?'

'No, sir. Lord Carickbairn was very bad last night.'

Hexham knew that, by the condition of the adjoining room.

'He couldn't have gone out if he had been very bad,' he said tentatively.

'Well, sir, it was as much as ever he could get down to the cab. Missis said he oughtn't to have been taken out in such a state.'

Hexham saw that there must have been a special reason for taking him out. He was a man of determination and prompt action,

despite his easy-going look. From the rooms in Victoria Mansions it was but ten minutes' walk to Scotland Yard. He went straight to the chief, and put the case before him in a few words.

'My name is Hexham,' he said, presenting his card; 'I am private keeper to Mr. Richard Anderson, son of the American millionaire of that name. You've heard of him, perhaps?'

'The gentleman who insists upon calling himself Lord Carickbairn?'

'Yes. I left him in charge of a man named Cummings three weeks ago to go to Ireland, where I expected to stay a few days. The illness of my mother detained me there. I came back this evening and found both Mr. Anderson and Cummings gone—under suspicious circumstances.'

'Suspicious circumstances?'—interrogatively.

'Yes. I wired Cummings to be at home,

and I learned that soon after getting my telegram he removed Mr. Anderson, whose condition must have rendered going out extremely dangerous.'

'Dangerous—in what way?'

'Dangerous as regards his own health, and the safety of others. He had an attack last night. After that he should have complete rest. Any excitement may produce a second attack, and in that condition he is capable of murder. I may tell you, if you are not already aware of the fact, that he is a homicidal maniac.'

'He was tried for murder in New York, and acquitted on the ground of insanity.'

'Yes.'

'Is Cummings aware of this?'

'Perfectly.'

'What motive can he have for taking him out?'

'I cannot tell. But I suspect some mer-

cenary end. Mr. Anderson, of course, has almost unlimited wealth, which might be the object of some intrigue.'

'But this man Cummings, whom you trusted with the charge of Mr. Anderson——'

'I have known him five years. He has been under me ever since I brought Mr. Anderson over. He has always appeared honest and trustworthy to me ; but I heard something of his antecedents yesterday, which shook my faith and determined me on returning at once.'

'Well, sir, what do you wish me to do?'

'Wire to all stations, and command instant inquiry. Of course, expense is no consideration.'

'Very good. Write a description of the two men as briefly as you can on this form.'

Hexham sat down and wrote at once :

'Anderson, gentleman, 31 ; tall, slight, fair ; pinched angular features, bent shoulders, head

forward, straw-coloured moustache; dressed (probably) in round hat and morning suit. Cummings, 45, stout, dark; shaven face; dresses and looks like a priest.'

'That is right,' said the chief, reading the paper and touching a bell-push; 'now, sir, will you wait here in the hope of an answer coming in, or will you call again?'

Hexham waited. The first hopeful answer was received an hour later.

'Seen at St. Paul's Station. Still inquiring.' Then came another. 'Dined at the hotel. Just gone.' Nothing of any importance was offered for half an hour, then Hexham read from the tape: 'Priest and gentleman with two ladies, smoking-room Holborn Viaduct Station.'

It was 8.25 when Hexham dashed up to the station in a hansom.

'Which is the next train out?' he asked of the porter, as he leapt from the cab.

'Continental in—off in a few minutes.'

Hexham rushed to the wicket, and at a glance caught sight of Cummings and Mrs. Redmond at the door of a carriage. Pushing the collector aside, he ran down towards them. They, catching sight of him, turned and walked rapidly off towards the front of the train. The guard, whistle in readiness, was holding up his hand.

'Open this door!' shouted Hexham, trying the handle.

'Here's a compartment, sir.'

'Open this door!'

'Can't, sir——'

'Quick!' shouted Hexham, 'don't you see the man's got an open razor in his hand?'

CHAPTER XLI.

Nessa was sitting by the window, opposite her husband, when Cummings suddenly exclaimed, 'Hexham!' At the sound of that name, Mrs. Redmond, who was speaking to her, stopped abruptly, turned her head sharply towards the wicket, and the next moment hurried away in the opposite direction with Cummings. As Hexham rushed up to the door, her husband flew to the other end of the compartment with the bag in his hand. There he stood for a moment, looking at Hexham as if in the last extremity of fear; then seizing the opportunity offered by the delay in opening the door, he tore open the bag, and snatched at the razor lying inside.

Under the impression that he intended to commit suicide, Nessa, with a scream, sprang to her feet, and darted forward to arrest his hand. He grasped her by the shoulder with his left hand, and, putting the razor to his mouth, opened the blade with his teeth, and she saw by the mad fury in his eyes that it was her life, and not his own, he intended to take. But before he could use the hideous thing, Hexham was upon him, and he was thrown back in the padded corner of the carriage, his arms tightly pinned to his side, and the razor fell from his unnerved fingers. So much was impressed distinctly on her mind, what followed was vague and dream-like—until, recovering from the shock, she found herself on the platform, supported by a couple of railway officials, and surrounded by a few curious spectators, the train, which was to have taken her, gliding away in the distance. There was no one on the platform

beyond the gaping group about her. Where were her husband and Hexham, and Mrs. Redmond and Cummings? The two latter had made their escape in the outgoing train; Hexham, intent only on avoiding unpleasant consequences of his patient's murderous attack, had whisked his man off the platform, bundled him into the first hansom available, and was now clear of the station. He had hardly cast a glance on Nessa; certainly he had not recognised her. In reply to her faltering questions, the officials, after looking about, could tell her no more than was patent to her own observation, and that was summed up in the policeman's brief announcement—'The parties are all gone, seemingly.'

The poor girl was utterly bewildered, and when asked if she would take a cab, she accepted the suggestion eagerly, with nothing but the vague idea of finding her husband,

by whose side it was now her duty to stand. There was no doubt in her mind about that. She had known, from the very beginning, that his mind was unsound, and it was the consideration that, by devoting her life to making his a little happier and better than she found it, which had finally decided her upon becoming his wife. She said, unsparingly, to herself that she had married him for her own selfish ends to escape destitution, to provide herself with luxuries, which seemed essential to happiness, and she was bound by her bargain to fulfil the duties of her position. And she reasoned—if a young, unworldly girl in such a desperate position can be said to reason—that her duty was not lessened by the fact that his condition was worse than she had been led to believe it, but the more imperative because he stood in greater need of love and tender care.

But how was she to find him? That

question was brought home to her by the cabman touching his hat, and asking, 'Where to, miss?' She was completely ignorant as to her husband's address. It occurred to her, however, that Mrs. Redmond might know, and so she told the man to take her to Mabel Grove.

'How much?' she asked, when she got out at Brompton.

'Three shillings, miss, is my fare.'

Nessa, looking in her purse, found that she had no more than two shillings and sixpence, and this the obliging cabman consented to take.

Mrs. Redmond had not returned; Nessa decided to wait until she came in, wondering what had detained her, perplexed still more by the recollection of her strange behaviour. Doubtless she would explain all when they met. In the meantime Nessa saw that she must try to be patient and reasonable, and

think out her position clearly. There was no alternative but to wait ; she had no friends, and no money to pay for a bed at an hotel. She walked about the room trying to overcome a growing suspicion of foul play and treachery that had sprung up in her mind, until the lengthening hours increasing the mystery of Mrs. Redmond's absence, she sank down on a couch, and, from sheer exhaustion, fell asleep. The woman of the house brought her some breakfast in the morning. Nessa waited until ten o'clock, and then, leaving word that she would return in the course of the morning, she went out to find the registry office where she had been married the day before.

The registrar recognised her at once, and, seeing the trouble in her face, led her into his inner office, and gave her a chair, before inquiring what business had brought her there.

'Will you tell me if you know where Lord Carickbairn lives?' Nessa asked.

'Your husband?'

'Yes.'

'The address he gave is 26, Eaton Street.'

'Is that near here?'

'Quite close—the second turning on the left.'

'Thank you very much.'

'But,' said the registrar, as Nessa was about to rise, 'he does not live there.'

The disappointment that suddenly followed the expression of satisfaction in the young wife's face told a tale, and he continued:

'Something unusual in the look of your husband and your friends led me to call at Eaton Street this morning, and I learnt there that the apartments were let to a gentleman, who, I presume, is Mr. Cummings, for a month, and the rent paid in advance, but that since that day neither he nor anyone

else had taken possession of them. I tried to discover where the gentleman lived, but the people of the house know nothing whatever about him: they even neglected to ask his name. It is probable that the rooms were taken only to comply with the regulations of the Marriage Act.'

'And—and that is all?' faltered Nessa.

'Well——' the registrar hesitated.

'Please tell me all you know—anything,' Nessa pleaded.

'It is rather a delicate question, but may I ask, Mrs. Anderson, if you are aware that "Lord Carickbairn" is an assumed title?'

Nessa shook her head—deprived of speech by the dread of some terrible revelation.

'It is. I have examined the Directory and the Peerage; there is no such name as Richard Anderson, Lord Carickbairn, in either.'

Nessa was stupefied.

'What am I to do?' she murmured.

'With a view to helping you if I can, may I ask what has happened?'

'They are gone—gone!' she exclaimed wildly.

'And you want to know how to find them. Well, we can, perhaps, find one. Maud Redmond,' he said, hunting in the register, 'lives in Mabel Grove. John Cummings gives the same address as your husband.'

'She is not there—she has not returned. I have been at her house all night.'

'I am afraid I can give you no further information. But if, as I am led to suppose by your youth and these grave circumstances, you have contracted this marriage without the sanction of your friends, and have now reason to suspect the good faith of those who induced you to marry—if I am right in these suppositions, I think I may venture to offer you advice.'

'Oh, pray do! I am quite helpless—quite unable to guide myself.'

'Then let your friends guide you. Go back to them.'

'My friends!' she said, in a tone of despair that told him she had no hope in that direction.

'If that is out of the question, there is still one other resource—consult a solicitor.'

'What can he do? Will he find my husband?'

'Ah, that may be a matter for the police to take up. I cannot say. But you may rely on this—that if you put your case in the hands of a first-class solicitor, he will take whatever steps are advisable to secure your interests.'

'Would it be very expensive?' Nessa asked timidly.

'That depends on the nature of the case. If it involved a lawsuit it might be very expensive. Of course, you can do nothing

without some outlay—I may say considerable outlay.'

'I am penniless, I can do nothing,' Nessa said to herself, rising with the feeling that it was useless to continue the discussion.

The registrar rose also.

'I think I may say with certainty,' he said, going towards the door, 'that you ought to do nothing without legal advice. I mean that you ought to take the opinion of a competent adviser before you put yourself again in communication with your husband and the persons who have led you to marry him.'

'Oh, surely my first duty is to find my husband,' said Nessa, with conviction in her tone.

'I am not sure of that.' He stopped, with his hand on the door, and, facing her, repeated gravely, 'I am not sure of that. Your solicitor may find that you have been led into this marriage by unscrupulous persons with a

mercenary view to their own advantage. You mistrust no one concerned—you do not see how this marriage may tend to their advantage. That is because you are ignorant of evil. I can imagine a case in which a marriage and desertion would affect a wife's fortune. Suppose, for instance, the wife's estate were entailed, the succession would be naturally diverted by her dying without family, and this could be effected by the husband abandoning her on the day of her marriage. I do not say that this is your case: I only suggest it as one example of a hundred combinations that might be devised with the same motive. Certain facts lead me to suspect that you are the victim of some such combination, and I have spoken, perhaps unwisely, because I feel it would be ungenerous to be silent. I can see that you are a lady by birth and education: your dress leads me to believe that you have wealth. Your husband is already proved to

be an impostor. You were deeply agitated when you came here yesterday, and you signed your name binding you to that man with evident reluctance. The woman who came with you was ill-bred and coarse : the man, Cummings, looked as if he were staking his fortune on the cast of a die—they were both eager to get the business done, and, when it was done, all three disappeared in a manner which it seems to me you cannot explain.'

'No. It is all a mystery to me.'

'Well, I think I have shown you where you may look for a clue to the mystery ; at least, I have tried to show that it is not your first duty to find your husband. It is, on the contrary—for a certain reason which a solicitor would have less diffidence in pointing out than I find—your duty to avoid correspondence or communication of any kind with him until you are assured that this marriage has not been contracted with a sinister purpose. You have

asked my advice,' he added, turning the handle of the door ; 'it is summed up in a dozen words : before you find your husband or his friends, or they find you, see a solicitor.'

He opened the door and bowed, and Nessa, expressing her gratitude in a few incoherent and confused phrases, went out.

CHAPTER XLII.

With hurried steps, yet aimlessly, Nessa followed the line of traffic, repeating in her mind all that the registrar had said, and extending his arguments as her own reason suggested. Conscious of her own worldly ignorance, she recognised the soundness of his advice; but how was she to engage the services of a solicitor without money? Her case looked hopeless enough for some time, but her courage rose with the growing perception that the difficulties which surrounded her were only to be overcome by vigorous effort, and that she must fight her battle unaided.

It was a still, bright morning. The line of coloured sun-blinds made the street gay;

there was a look of content in the faces of people. In the Green Park, where she found herself at length, gardeners were bedding out geraniums and summer plants ; the waterfowl left a sparkling ripple in their wake ; there were children everywhere. Nessa found a vacant seat under a tree in a quiet place, and set herself to settle the problem of existence in a spirit that owed much of its tranquil energy to these trifles.

She said to herself that, as she could do nothing without money, she must get money at once; that was really the first thing to be done. She had been told that the employment of a solicitor would entail a considerable outlay ; it was obvious, therefore, that she must get a considerable sum of money. How ? Well, how did other people get money ? By work. Very well, she must work and earn it. Now, what sort of work could she do that would bring in a lot of money ?

Here her heart fell as she recalled to mind the means by which she had made more money than she knew what to do with. She looked back on the life at Olympia with a strange mingling of delight and sadness, regret and aversion, for Sweyn was inextricably associated with these memories. She could never think of that joyous past without a dreadful apprehension that Sweyn esteemed her less for having been what Mrs. Blount called a 'sukkus rider;' and even now, when she had separated herself from him for ever, she recoiled from the idea of resuming the profession as if there were some sort of infidelity in such a course.

'No,' she said to herself, 'I will not think of that, nor of him. That is all past, and I must forget.'

So she put the International out of her thoughts, and looked about for some other means of getting a fortune. It was not easy

to settle at once, but one thing was evident—she must work, beginning at once, for without a shelter for the night and food, she could not live.

A flash of light reflected by her bracelet as she moved her hand suggested a ready means of supplying these primary wants, and she rose, thinking that somewhere in the neighbourhood of the Clock Tower rising in the distance she might find a jeweller who would be willing to purchase some of her trinkets.

She crossed over the bridge, and, a little way down the Westminster Road, caught sight of a nice-looking jeweller's, with no one in the shop save a gentleman behind the counter, who seemed to be looking out for customers.

After walking past the door twice, she screwed up her courage—a process which made her very hot and cold by turns—and walked up to the counter. One glance at

the beautiful and elegant young lady made the man obsequiously polite as he bent forward and begged to know what he might have the pleasure of doing for her.

'I want to know if you buy jewellery,' said Nessa timidly.

The shopkeeper looked disappointed. However, he said he might buy if the article were in his line, and so Nessa unclasped her bracelet and handed it to him. He glanced at it, then stuck a glass in his eye and examined the inner side ; after that, he asked if she had anything else she wished to sell, but not enthusiastically. Nessa drew off her other bracelet, and, judging by his manner that this also was not quite in his line, she hastily drew off her glove and gave him her rings—all except her wedding-ring. When he had examined them all, he put them together on the glass show-case and said :

'What do you want for the lot?'

He was quite lukewarm in his manner now.

'I hardly know what price to say. They cost a great deal of money,' said Nessa.

He raised his eyebrows, and, sticking the glass in his eye, once more examined them.

'What do you call a great deal?' he asked.

'One bracelet was a present, but the other and the rings cost me about forty pounds.'

'Where did you buy them?' he began the examination all over again.

'They were bought at Osmond's, in Regent Street.'

'Did you buy them there yourself?'

'No. A lady bought them for me.'

'I can give you fifty shillings for the lot.'

'Fifty shillings for *all?*'

'Yes, the two bracelets and the three rings.'

'But surely if they cost forty pounds—

indeed, now, I recollect they cost more than that.'

The jeweller took the glass from his eye, and, shaking his head, said :

'You'll excuse me, but they didn't cost five pounds!'

'Oh, I think you are mistaken. That diamond ring was sold to me for fifteen pounds because it was not large enough for the lady, but she told me that she paid twenty for it to Mr. Osmond.'

The jeweller smiled, and took the trouble to draw a tray of rings from the window, from which he selected one exactly like Nessa's.

'You can have that for eighteen shillings,' he said blandly, 'and it's quite new.'

This practical proof of Mrs. Redmond's dishonesty did more than anything else to make Nessa realize that her friend was false, and no longer to be trusted.

'Not one of these things is genuine,' the jeweller continued. 'The stones are not real, and the gold is only plated. Osmond wouldn t have them in the place. Take them to him and see what he says.'

Nessa shook her head.

'Well, you can leave them here, and buy them back when you want them. You'll see them all in the window this afternoon. The bracelets I shall mark at fifteen shillings; the rings about seventeen or eighteen shillings each. I may have to keep them in stock a year, and then the profit will not be too great for a business of this kind.'

Nessa accepted the fifty shillings, and left the shop in dejection; not because she had got so little for her trinkets—she hardly thought of that—but because her last hope of finding Mrs. Redmond exonerated from the imputations raised against her was gone. There was now something more to forget.

Diverging from the main street with the idea of finding an apartment suitable to her means in the neighbourhood, she came into the Lambeth Palace Road, and finally took a bedroom in a quiet, dingy house for the low price of ten shillings a week, with attendance. When this was accomplished, she went back to the Westminster Road and bought such things as she needed, and this gave her a feeling of independence which was a great comfort to her. Amongst the rest, she had bought two or three newspapers, and, after dinner, she set herself to read the advertisements and select those which might be answered the next day. She thought she could undertake to teach some young children ; and one advertisement for a daily governess in a Christian family where two servants were kept she marked for her first application the next day. She did not quite see why the two servants were brought in, but the adver-

tisement was very amiably worded, and her wide interpretation of Christianity led her to suppose that the family must be very loving and gentle.

In the evening she took a walk along the Albert Embankment. The stillness of the evening, the solemn grandeur of the river flowing past, the glory of the sun setting in the coppery haze, imbued her with a sense of awe, and inspired her with a devout, earnest longing to be wiser than she had been, and better. She was ashamed to think how she had abandoned herself to despair in the past few weeks, and had sought to alleviate the maddening depression that comes from such self-abandonment by unworthy means. With this contrition and sadness, the figure of Sweyn came into her mind, and to think that he, a man, must suffer as she suffered, so wrung her heart with pity that she had to linger on the deserted walk till

the silent tears that came to her relief were shed.

Amongst other good resolutions she made that night before falling asleep, Nessa resolved henceforth to keep a diary ; for, seeing that many of her misfortunes had arisen from want of thought, she very properly considered that, in recording each night the events of the day, she might cultivate a habit of reflecting, and, by the discovery of her errors, be less liable to fall again into mistakes. This highly commendable practice she stuck to for fully a month, and a few extracts here from her veracious chronicle will show briefly what happened to her about that time.

'May 10th.—To-day I called upon Mrs. Blatherwick at Hampstead to see if she would take me as a daily governess, but I am sorry to say I did not suit her. She was not dissatisfied with my handwriting (though I was so nervous that I wrote the text she

dictated very badly), and found no fault with my French and German (though there again I used a wrong tense in the German and mixed up the genders in French); and I readily agreed to take the younger children out for a walk in the afternoons, and make myself useful in the house when the others were not engaged in studies; but she was disappointed to find that I was not a good needlewoman, and thought my manner betokened a want of Christian humility. She objected to the style in which my hair was dressed, and could not think of engaging a young person who did not wear a modest little knot behind. The great fault, however, was my dress: she wondered how I could be so ill advised as to present myself to a lady in a costume so unbecoming to my station, and it was on this point I think that she decided upon declining to consider the subject any further. Of course it was very ridiculous

to apply for a situation in such a rich dress and a hat of that kind, and I must get something very plain before I try again—for Mrs. Blatherwick quite lost her temper when she got upon this subject, and hardly inclined her head when she had told one of her two servants to "see this young person to the door."

'11th.—Mrs. Heath' (her landlady) 'was kind enough to introduce me to her sister in the Kensington Road, who is a dressmaker, and she is going to make me two black merino dresses and a jacket in exchange for my satin gown and mantle, and charge me nothing, which seems to me very generous, as she has to buy the stuff and make it; and who will give me eight and sixpence for my hat, which will enable me to buy a little bonnet I saw in the Westminster Road without taking anything from my purse. There are some cheap silk gloves which will go

with the black dress, and then I can give my long gloves to Mrs. Heath, if she will accept them.

'18th.—One of my dresses and the jacket came home this evening. They fit beautifully, and I like the bonnet I bought at Westham's, and was very glad to get them; for it is terrible to do nothing, and the money going out instead of coming in.

'19th.—I went to Hackney to-day about the advertisement I cut out of yesterday's paper—Mrs. Fox. Her family, she told me, was very musical, and her husband, who is a captain in the volunteers, desired all the children to be able to play the "Battle of Prague." I trembled when she opened the piece of music and asked me if I could play it at sight, for I never did play well, and when I read between the bars "roll of drums," I didn't know how I should do it. However, we didn't get as far as that, for as soon as I

took off my glove Mrs. Fox, looking at my wedding-ring in surprise, asked if I were married. I said yes, of course, and when she asked some further questions I had to tell her that I was not living with my husband ; upon which she rose, saying very stiffly, that she would not trouble me to play the "Battle of Prague," as she could not think of engaging a married lady as governess. I cannot understand that at all.

'20th.—I think I shall have to leave off my wedding-ring—there is no necessity to say I am married, unless I am asked—for today there was a repetition of my experiences yesterday, only worse, Mrs. Hocquet telling me that she could not understand how a young person in my situation should think of applying to her for an engagement, and she said this with an offensive manner which seemed to imply that my position was a very discreditable one.

'24th.—Went to Mrs. Sherrard's, at Tulse Hill, without my ring. No objections were raised, for Mrs. Sherrard was a stout, careless woman, and seemingly very proud of being a Liberal in politics and her husband on the School Board; but she could not pay more than twelve pounds a year, and seeing when I reckoned it up that this only came to about five shillings a week, I was obliged to decline because my rent costs ten.

'25th.—I tried to-day for an engagement as resident governess at Pimlico, but the lady asked questions which I could not answer, and pointed out very clearly (though not very amiably), that I could not expect anyone to take a young woman into the house without references or experience, or anything at all. So now I really don't know what to do; for I can't live on twelve pounds a year, and it's hopeless to think of entering a family as resident governess. And my money is going,

though I try to be careful, and have left off sugar.

'28th.—Answered two advertisements to-day: one at a draper's in Kentish Town, and the other at a confectioner's in Cheapside. Both wanted someone who had been out before. I hear one has to serve a certain time for nothing in shops before one can hope to get any salary. It is dreadful to look in my purse. If I can't find something before the end of next week I shall not have money enough to pay my rent.

'June 1st.—To-day I sold my wedding-ring for eight shillings. When I thought of it the other day it seemed almost wicked; but I don't see now why I should keep it. I have not worn it for over a week, and indeed I cannot realize that I am a married woman. I am not likely ever again to see my husband, so why should I feel any scruple about selling the ring he gave me?

'3rd.—This afternoon I passed two girls who stared very hard at me, but I am used to that, and do not take much notice of it. One of these came after me, however, and asked if I was not Viola Dancaster; I remembered her then as one of the girls in the International Company. She was very amiable, and when we had talked a little while she asked me what I was doing now, and seemed quite astonished when I told her I was looking for an engagement as a shop-assistant. She says I might be earning twenty pounds a week easily in the profession, and gave me the name and address of her father, who is a music-hall agent—a great many professionals live in Hercules Buildings—declaring that he could find me an engagement as a star artiste at once. I think I must go and see him, for I have only a shilling and a few pence left now, and nothing more to sell.'

CHAPTER XLIII.

The next entry in Nessa's journal recorded a change of fortune.

'I have found an engagement at last,' she wrote, 'and one that I can accept without humiliation. This morning when I rose, I said to myself I would wait one more day before going to the agent in Hercules Buildings—having yet enough to buy food for the day—and so, looking out the promising advertisement in the paper, I went to Mr. Mulloch, the art pottery shop, in Oxford Street, but with very little hope indeed that he would accept me, especially when I saw what a fine shop it was, and caught sight of four or five young ladies seated at one end,

who looked as if they had come for the situation. I expected to be sent to join them and take my turn; but the shopman, after I had told him my business, left me for a few minutes, and, coming back, led me directly into Mr. Mulloch's office. He is an elderly gentleman, and was particularly kind and polite to me. He told me that he wanted a young lady to superintend a show of art pottery in one of the courts at the Crystal Palace; and when I replied that I should like such an engagement, but that I knew nothing of the business, and had never before been a saleswoman, he nodded and said with a smile: "I think I know you and understand your position." Then, opening a drawer, he brought out a photograph, and putting it before me said: "I believe that is your portrait, is it not?" I think I turned very red—I know my face burned—as I recognised my own likeness—one of

the large ones that were in all the shop-windows after my first success at Olympia. "I was an unhappy spectator of your accident, Miss Dancaster," he continued, "and I never hoped to have the pleasure of seeing you again, still less of having it in my power to be of service to you in any way. I suppose you have no wish to return to your profession after such a terrible experience?" I told him that I should prefer doing anything else. "Of course," he went on, "it will be a great advantage to us to have a young lady with your attractions at our exhibit, but as the whole thing is rather an advertisement of our ware than a place of sale, we cannot afford to pay you a large salary; still, if you would accept a small sum—say a pound a week—I shall be most happy to close with you." This offer quite took my breath away: it was so much better than anything I had a right to ex-

pect after failing to obtain situations of the most unpleasant kind, where the remuneration given was seldom more than twelve shillings a week, and sometimes as low as five. Taking my silence, I think, as a sign of objection on my part, Mr. Mulloch continued: "If you consider the salary insufficient — and, of course, it must seem ridiculously small in comparison with what you have been gaining in your profession— we might make some arrangement for a small percentage on any orders you may obtain in excess of the average returns." I hastened to assure him that I was quite satisfied with the pay; then he said, with a smile: "Well, I assure you the work is not hard or unpleasant, and the hours are moderate: ten in the morning till five in the afternoon. To-morrow is Saturday: now, if you could meet me at the Palace in the Venetian Court at, say, eleven o'clock

to-morrow morning, you will be able to see the exhibit and decide whether it will suit you." I said I would certainly be there at the time he named, and asked when the engagement would begin. "As soon as possible," he replied. "On Monday, if it is convenient to you. Our Miss Smith is only staying on to oblige us." So, to-morrow I shall go to the Palace, and, oh! I do hope that nothing will happen to prevent me from getting this occupation, for I feel more and more that even if I go back to the old life, I shall be found such a poor, spiritless, shame-faced creature, that the public and the managers and everyone else will be dissatisfied with me.

'5th.—It is all settled. I am to begin on Monday. I never thought when I had so much money that the prospect of earning enough for my subsistence could give me such joy. I could hardly see to write those

words for the tears of gratitude that came into my eyes. My good Mrs. Heath lent me ten shillings this morning, else I don't know how I could have kept my appointment, and I arrived at the Crystal Palace a little after ten. It is a lovely place. There are plants climbing up the ironwork, and fountains, palms, and ferns, with flowers everywhere ; and beautiful statuary ; so that it seemed to me like a glimpse of fairyland as I walked down the long building. Turning out of the sunny aisle there are beautiful cool courts, and in one of these is Mr. Mulloch's exhibit of pottery. He met me there punctually at eleven, and introduced me to Miss Smith, a nice, agreeable young lady, who tells me there is scarcely anything to do but to sit in a chair and read, or watch the people going by outside ; for very few people come into the court. She was very glad to hear that I could come in on Mon-

day, for she is engaged to be married, and her lover is very jealous because of the attentions she receives, and cannot very well escape them. But she tells me the young gentlemen who come to amuse themselves are not really offensive, only stupid. All this and much more she told me after Mr. Mulloch had gone, but I must not forget to write down that before he left me he was good enough to offer me a cheque for a month's salary in advance, which I accepted very gratefully. I stayed with Miss Smith to learn as much as I could about my duties. She showed me where she hangs her bonnet and jacket, etc., and her arrangement for taking meals unseen, and very generously gave me the spirit stove she uses for making tea, heating her fringe tongs, etc. In two hours I seemed to have learnt all she had to teach, and Mr. Brown (her lover) coming in the afternoon (after

we had eaten our dinner behind the screen, which was great fun) I offered to take her place for the rest of the day, as she said she only wanted to see the fountains in the gardens play. They were both delighted ; so while Miss Smith put on her things I took off mine (with more fun behind the screen), and when they left I took Miss Smith's chair and sat down beside her favourite stall with a book, quite proud of my position. But I could not read for the novelty of it all, and so went round looking at *my* faïence and china, which is all most beautiful and interesting. And I even ventured to recommend a dinner service to a clergyman who stopped to admire it. He seemed quite interested in what I said about it, and I do think I should have made him buy it, if it had not been for his wife, who didn't seem at all nice. At half-past four I lit my little stove and made

tea for myself, and I don't think I ever enjoyed a meal so much in all my life. But the most delightful thing of all was to hear the music (which is played every afternoon in the concert-room quite close to my exhibit, and is quite audible—even the *piano* passages—where I sit). The programme-boy passing through my court, I bought one, so knew all that was going on; and a selection from *Il Pescatore di Perle*, by Bizet, almost made me cry, one air was so beautiful. It made me think of my old friend who was so fond of music, and of all the happiness I have had, but chiefly of those days when I did not know that I loved him, and he did not know that he loved me. Oh, if we could have always gone on like that! I do allow myself to think of him now, for I do not wish to forget by foolish extravagance as I did when I was so wicked at first; but the memory of him

and all he said and did makes me feel better and encourages me to think of good, pure things, which must surely make me better. If I had thought always like this, I could not have done those wicked and foolish things that fill me with remorse when I look back on that dreadful time that culminated in my marriage with Mr. Anderson. I do think I was not in my right senses then, but mad. That is my only excuse, but I think it is an excuse, for I say to myself that *if a girl can be wicked and mad enough in her despair to commit suicide—as I sometimes thought it would be best for me to do—and madness is her excuse, then indeed it is not unnatural or inexcusable that she should commit less foolish and wicked actions.* I thought of him all the time that the band played, and I think I must always do so when I hear beautiful music. And it cannot be wrong, for I do no one any harm by

thinking, and it does make my heart tender and thankful to God. They encored *Il Pescatore di Perle*, and, as the lovely sacred air was repeated, I prayed with my whole soul that he might forget me and be happy —as he surely must when he marries Grace, who is such an angel, and so fitted in everything to be the wife of such a man.'

After the novelty of her new position had worn off, Nessa ceased to write her diary ; for her life became one of unvarying regularity, and, except that she gave up her lodgings in Lambeth and took a couple of rooms near the Palace, no event occurred for two months worth writing about. Then something happened which was to be written on her mind and never after effaced.

One evening, when she turned from locking the door of her court, she found a man standing before her, and that man was

Sweyn Meredith. She stopped with a faint exclamation that meant joy—pain—hope—fear—anything, everything !

He took her hand without a word ; only when he had led her on a few steps in the leafy shade of the deserted colonnade, he murmured :

'Found at last, my love !'

She was trembling and weak from this sudden shock, but she found strength to stop and draw her hand from his on hearing these words.

'Oh, you must not speak to me like that,' she faltered ; 'we must not be together.'

'Must not be together !' he exclaimed passionately ; 'do you think I have hunted for you day and night for three months to give you up now that you are found ?'

He laughed derisively, but suddenly checking himself, as if confronted by a terrible doubt, he said :

'One moment. Look me in the face, Nessa.'

He spoke sternly. His command was not to be disobeyed. Nessa looked up into his face, which was absolutely fierce with this sudden suspicion that she had given her heart to another. But it did not terrify her; its manly strength was admirable in her eyes; the haggard cheek, the sunken eye, the line that told of weary anxiety moved her heart with pity. And as she still looked up to this, her lord, the hard lines melted away from his face, the brows unbent, and the firm lips quivered.

'You love me still, darling,' he murmured: 'you love me as you did the morning that we parted, and nothing in the world shall keep us asunder.'

'Grace! Grace!' was all that Nessa could say in remonstrance.

'No, that name shall not bar me. Nor

shall that name be your plea again for giving me the slip. You are mine now—inevitably mine!'

He took her hand and pressed it fervently between his big palms as he led her onwards.

'Sweyn—oh, my friend,' she pleaded, striving to free herself from the meshes of this love that seemed to tangle all her faculties, 'we must not do this wrong!'

'Wrong!' he ejaculated, stopping again to look down in the beloved face; 'do you think I would tempt you, whom I love as dearly as I respect myself, "to do wrong"? Wrong! If Grace were my wife, I would leave her, loving you as I do. Which is the wrong—to break God's law or man's?'

'Surely it is wrong to break either.'

'Yet, if one must be broken, surely it is not the law of God, by which one heart is bound to another. But no law shall be broken, for Grace is not my wife. And were

I weak enough to offer her my hand with my love gone to another, she would rightly scorn to take it. Marriage without love is crime, for we must love ; and you wrong us both—Grace as well as me, if you think we would willingly be criminal—you wrong us both if you think that we can forget the past, and in years to come patch up an alliance and call it marriage. Do you know how I came to discover you ?'

'No.'

'Grace sent me here to find you: Grace, whose heart you think clings to the man who loves you as he never did and never could love her !'

'How did she know I was here ?'

'She was here yesterday. You passed her in the evening. There was a fête, the Palace was crowded, and before she could overtake you, you were lost. She imagined you had some occupation in the building by your

manner: you walked quickly; you were alone, and took no notice of the things and people about you. More than that: she believed by your expression that you were not happy—that you had not forgotten me. This she told me this afternoon—told me that if you had an engagement here, I, too, might find you. But without that probability I should have come. I have looked for you all over London. I heard that you had been seen in Kensington, and for a month I have hunted the streets about there.'

'Oh, she is generous!' said Nessa, feeling that she could not have done so much.

'She knows me—she knows that I could never love anyone but you, and gave me credit for more steadfastness than you would allow me, though she has had less proof of my love than I have given you. You thought I could forget you, and ran away in the belief that after a little while I should cease to love

you.' He paused for a minute, then in a gentler tone he said: 'It is strange that after thinking of you with such yearning tenderness all these past weary days, I should tell you of your faults when we meet. I am like a mother recovering her lost child—the first instinct is to scold it for the pain it has given——'

'I am glad to be scolded. I deserve punishment—scold me!'

'I have done—that is the first impulse; the next,' he added tenderly, 'is to hug you to my breast and make you feel how I do love you.'

He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it fervently.

They were alone on the steps leading down into the garden. Nessa, at the touch of his lips, felt that nothing in the world was worth a thought beside such love as his, and, with that impulsive self-abandonment which was

characteristic of her nature, impatient of self-restraint, she turned to him with a coo of delight, and, laying her cheek against his breast, looked up into his face as she murmured :

'My own dear love! I, too, will keep before all others that law which binds us heart to heart, and I will never, never, never leave you again!'

CHAPTER XLIV.

That night Nessa burnt her certificate of marriage with Richard Anderson. As she looked at the piece of paper before putting it in the flames, she said to herself that virtually she was still free to marry Sweyn—that the mere signing of her name could not make her the wife of that other man ; and, to silence the objections of her whispering conscience, she repeated again and again Sweyn's unconsidered words, 'Which is the wrong—to break man's law or God's? . . . If one must be broken, surely it is not the law of God, by which one heart is bound to another ?' At another time she might have seen that she was doing wrong, but she was incapable of reasoning

clearly at this time, being wholly carried away by the force of passion. With that reckless disregard of consequences which distinguishes the love of women, she would give herself to Sweyn, no matter what might follow. If the worst that could happen came, she would take the punishment and count herself a gainer by having the love of such a man as Sweyn. She believed that, if she offended against the law, only she would have to suffer, not realizing that others must be involved with her. And yet she was conscious of doing wrong, or she would not have burnt the certificate of her marriage—would not have perceived that this act in her life she must keep for ever secret from Sweyn.

The danger of discovery, remote as it was, already began to weigh upon her mind ; and even the dear joy of meeting Sweyn the next evening could not quite remove it. She felt it there at the bottom of her heart—something

she wished away—something which stood between her and complete happiness.

'Have you settled where you should like to live when we're married?' Sweyn asked, as they were going through the grounds the next evening.

'No; anywhere, dear. I don't care,' Nessa replied, pressing his arm, and with a voice full of happy indifference.

'Anywhere in London, I suppose you mean,' he suggested, smiling.

'I mean anywhere that pleases you. Where you are will be the happiest place in the world to me.'

'If you say such sweet things as that, you dear one, I shan't be able to talk business.'

'Is it business?' asked Nessa seriously; 'I didn't know that.'

'Yes, it is business. The fact is, sweetheart, I've been trying for years to make a practice in London, and I've failed. My

connection consists chiefly of those who need advice gratis, and physic on the same terms. While I only wanted tobacco, the practice did not cost more than I could afford out of my little income ; but now I want a wife, the case is different, and I should like to get something in addition to my dividends.'

'I am not extravagant now, dear ; I have learnt to live economically, and, unless you objected to it, I could still keep my engagement, and so we could wait for better times.'

'You will talk in that strain, will you ?' he said, and then, glancing round to assure himself that no one was near, he took her in his arms and hugged her to him.

'I did mean what I said, dear,' Nessa protested, when that lovely embrace was over, and she had composed her mind to serious considerations.

'So did I. Well, now to business again.

How should you like Buenos Ayres for a dwelling-place?'

'Buenos Ayres! Why, that's in South America!' she exclaimed in astonishment, for she had thought of the suburbs of London as the limit of their removal.

'Yes, it's very much in South America, and it's a hot place; though I dare say the heat would not be more intolerable than the fogs of London in the winter, and it's a long way from Regent Street and the theatres.'

'Oh, if you knew how little I care for them!'

'The flowers and fruit must be lovely, but except half a dozen resident merchants and their families, you wouldn't see another Englishman in ten years, perhaps.'

'I don't want to see any other Englishman in the world but you—never.'

'Oh, sweetheart, I wish I could say such lovely things to you! I can only feel them

here,' he said, pressing her hand to his heart.

'Tell me about Buenos Ayres,' she said, 'in serious earnest.'

'Well, then, in serious earnest, I had an official appointment in Buenos Ayres offered me this morning. It's better than anything I could hope to get in England, and I think we might put by enough in a dozen years to come back and give advice on the old terms in London. It is so good an offer that I postponed giving a decisive answer until I had asked you about it. Now tell me, wife, what answer you would like me to give.'

'Oh, let us go there! It will make me happy beyond anything you can think of.'

She said no more than she felt. It was an intense relief to think that she would be beyond the probability—almost possibility—of meeting that man Anderson. Her eager acceptance of his proposal astonished Sweyn.

'If we go, it must be directly. I doubt if we should have more than a week to prepare.'

'We can get everything ready in that time.'

'I suppose we could be married by special license.'

'If not, we could be married there.'

'Oh, we'll be married here, if possible. It will look more genteel, and I shall have to be particularly genteel in such a position. Besides, I intend to marry you before all the world. My vanity demands that.'

Nessa, hearing this, trembled to think of what might have happened after being publicly married if she had stayed in England, now partly realizing for the first time the peril to which she had wilfully blinded herself.

'So I am to accept the offer, eh, sweetheart?' he asked presently.

'Yes, oh yes!' she answered eagerly; 'unless,' she added, observing reluctance in

his voice and manner—'unless you think you cannot be happy there.'

'Oh, I shall be happy enough,' he replied with a laugh; 'a lotus-eater's existence will agree with me, I'll be bound. We shall lie in hammocks and smoke cigarettes and dream away the years. But it's a kind of exile, and my wife is too good for that. That is chiefly why I would have stayed in England had it been possible.'

'But you don't think it is possible,' she said anxiously.

'There are too many of us here for all to make fortunes,' he said, shaking his head; 'and if my wife cannot take the position in London that she deserves, it is better for us to go away. We shall still be young when we come back in ten years.'

'In ten years,' said Nessa to herself, 'I may come back with safety.'

When Nessa heard the next evening that

the arrangement was made, and that they were to sail for Buenos Ayres in seven days, she could hardly contain her delight, and her subsequent gaiety was almost painful to Sweyn, suggesting, as it did, a form of hysteria.

There was much to do in preparing for this sudden departure. Mr. Mulloch put one of his assistants in the Palace in order to free Nessa at once, and she spent nearly all her time with Sweyn in these preparations. They were days full of joy to both, tempered only by some moments of anxiety to Sweyn in perceiving at times an expression of intense pain passing like a cloud over Nessa's face. He attributed it to the natural reaction from feverish excitement. Such a 'reaction' came one evening after he had been telling her about his past life and family relations. He seemed to be inviting her confidence, and she would tell him nothing. Oh, if she could

only relieve her heart of the secret that seemed to be cankering it, and tell him all! But how was that possible? She could tell him nothing, for fear it should involve the disclosure that she, Vanessa Grahame, was married to Richard Anderson.

Her reticence about her antecedents did not astonish him. Without having reason to fear inquiry into her own life, a girl might well recoil from making known certain facts with regard to her parentage from simple delicacy.

'She will tell me all one of these days,' he said to himself; 'she is not yet my wife.'

One day he told her that, to get the special license, his solicitor wanted to know the date and place of her birth. She looked at him aghast.

'I cannot tell you,' she gasped.

'Don't let that frighten you, love,' he said;

'I dare say his Grace will dispense with that formality if he only gets his fees.'

He himself was doubtful whether he had been born in Kent or Surrey.

Another 'reaction' appeared in her face on opening the license which he had obtained and she had taken from his hand with hysterical mirth. She saw herself named there Viola Dancaster. She was to be married to the man she loved under a false name—she was to cheat the one she worshipped as her god.

At last all was settled, and three days before they were to sail they went into Devonshire to be married from the house of Sweyn's brother. She won the hearts of Robert Meredith and his wife and all the household by her beauty and grace, her sweetness and warmth.

On the morning of the wedding Nessa came downstairs as white as a ghost. She

had been fighting all night with her conscience and had come out of the struggle exhausted but victorious. She had trampled every scruple under foot for the love of this man; but she could not rejoice.

Nessa dared not look to the right or the left as she went up the aisle. She knew that the church was full of people. She dared not look for the fear of meeting those wild, bloodshot eyes of her husband. When the clergyman commanded anyone who knew of any just reason why she and Sweyn should not be united to declare it, her heart stood still, and she expected to hear a voice break the silence, and tell that she was married to Richard Anderson.

But the silence was unbroken, and the marriage was made.

'Now indeed, love, you are my wife,' said Sweyn, kissing her.

She returned his kiss passionately; but a

voice within her said, 'You are not his wife. You have not made him your husband by this crime.'

'What matters it what I am?' she said to herself wildly; 'my love is mine, and down in that sunny land no one will come between us, and we will eat lotus together.'

With that she pressed Sweyn's arm to her bosom, and the colour came back to her face.

They were to sail the next day; in a few hours their faces would be turned to a sunny land, and black care would be left behind.

But that way of escape was already closed. On their return from church Sweyn's brother, opening a letter that had come in his absence, turned to Nessa, and, taking her hand, said:

'My dear, I have a surprise for you. Here is a letter from my solicitor, announcing the successful termination of negotiations that have been pending ever since Sweyn talked of

taking you away to America, by which he is put in possession of the practice of a late physician in Harley Street. Take it to him: it is a wedding present for both from a brother who loves you too well to let you leave him.'

CHAPTER XLV.

The opening for an active and useful career offered to Sweyn was not to be refused. He was not by nature indolent or self-indulgent —not a lotus-eater ; his acquirements and talent fitted him for the position he was to take amongst eminent men of his profession ; and Nessa was at once too loving and too proud of her husband to persuade him from the path to greatness, even if she had found the pretext.

But she felt that a sword was hanging over her head which sooner or later must fall. She could not blind herself to contemplation of the future. It was too terrible for that.

There was a fascination in it which she could not resist.

She foresaw that as Sweyn's wife she must be peculiarly exposed to the observation and criticism of London society, and it was hopeless to suppose that the secret of her life could long remain undiscovered. The result of that discovery was no less evident. Despite his broad views and his passionate love for her, Sweyn would refuse to live with the wife of another man; and though he might share her misery, he would not participate in her crime. Now, too late, she perceived that the consequences of her act would not be for her to bear alone; the man she loved must be involved in her own shame and tribulation, and their fall must be the greater for the prominent height to which they were now raised.

If she had been a strong-minded woman she would have confessed all to her husband in this the eleventh hour. But she was not

that. She was weak in many things. She was dominated by love, and that would not permit her to say the word which must put an end for ever to the one joy of her life.

Yet she yearned to tell him all, to have no secret from him; and the result of this yearning was that when they came to London she unburdened her mind in fugitive notes, which she put together in a box, with the presentiment that Sweyn would read them when she was banished from his roof.

Here are a few of these notes:

'This afternoon we took possession of our grand house in Harley Street. When we had been all through the rooms, from the kitchen to the garret, and were come down again into the splendid drawing-room, my beloved Sweyn said, "Yes, this is a very fine house, dear wife, but we must knock it about and make a comfortable home of it." Then having no thought but of my great happiness (for his

arm was round my neck, and I held his dear hand against my cheek), we settled, laughing, that we would change the distribution of everything in the room, rehanging the pictures in better lights, and make it gay with flowers; and going thence into the dining-room, we agreed to leave that as it was, and only dine there when we were obliged to, *i.e.*, when we had to entertain a large company, the room downstairs being much lighter, cosier, and more suitable for two to dine in, with room beside at the table for one or two friends.

'Then we went into the study, which is also a fine room, but very severe and proper. I proposed that we should have the Japanese screen up from the morning-room to shut off the anatomical studies, and place the big arm-chair with a nice soft rug before the fireplace, and turn out the *Encyclopædia Britannica* from the little case for Sweyn's old books, keeping a shelf at the bottom for all his pipes, so that

it would be snug and cheerful for him when he wanted to sit alone and smoke and read his favourite authors. "That will be famous," said he ; "you shall arrange it after your own heart and make it perfect. But the happiest hours I shall spend here will be those when my dear wife comes to my knee and makes me forget my favourite author in a good long chat about nothing in particular." Till then I had been as gay and full of fun as he, but at those words my heart-strings seemed to snap.

And you could not tell what had so suddenly put out my mirth, my darling. I could not tell you, dear love, what I am writing now. The thought flashed upon me that the day must arrive when I may not come to your knee, when you will sit alone in the room I am preparing for you. Oh for the skill to make it so charming that you may forget my sorrow and shame and find comfort there!

* * * * *

'We keep three maid-servants and a man who drives the brougham. They are good servants, and so no great art is required in managing them. Indeed, it requires more study to correct my own faults than theirs; but I am doing my best to be punctual and neat and correct, and these efforts are more than rewarded by the satisfaction of my dear Sweyn. "Everything goes like clockwork under your management," he said this evening; "these little dinners are simply delightful. You must have had a lot of experience with servants, love."

'I told him I had a dresser all to myself in the later part of the International. "But before that?" he said. I told him I was at school before that. "But at home—for you went home sometimes, I suppose?" "No, dear," I answered; "I had no home. When I left school I went after a very little while to the International." "Tell me all about it," he

said, drawing me to him and taking me in his great, strong, tender arms.

'You wondered at my silence, love; you wondered why I trembled in your arms at such a slight request. I knew that if I told you any more I must tell you all. I could not feel your heart beating against mine and tell you a lie. I felt that if you pressed me to speak I must obey, whatever followed. But you silenced me with a kiss and a few gentle words, saying it was too soon to think of anything but the present. Oh, my darling, it must ever be too soon to part from you.

* * * * *

'Sweyn took me with him in the brougham this morning, leaving me in the carriage while he visited his patients. The day was beautiful and warm, and it is a lovely little "pill-box," with just room for us two, and a little case in front for books. Sweyn was very gay, and gave me most amusing descriptions of his

patients, who, he told me, were all suffering from the same complaint—nothing to do. He told me I had not looked so bright and well since our marriage, and I think that is why he was so full of spirits. Indeed, I have felt all day happy, for we have been married a fortnight to-day and nothing has happened, so that I am beginning to hope all may yet go well. For though our marriage was published in two or three of the daily papers, it is scarcely likely that my enemies would look there for me. Nevertheless, while the brougham was standing in the crowded streets, I could not fix my attention on the book in my hands for thinking that amongst the many curious people who glanced into the carriage one might recognise me.

* * * * *

'After writing last night, I had a shock which threw down all the hopes I had built. The housemaid asked if she might go home

to see her mother, who was ill—promising to be in by half-past ten at the latest, as her home, she said, was only in Eaton Street, Chelsea. I consented, though I fear not without betraying my embarrassment. I was overcome with the terrible fear that this girl's home might be the very house in which my husband had lodgings, and it is scarcely probable that anyone in Eaton Street should have failed to hear about my marriage from the registrar, who told me he had pursued inquiries there. The girl did not return until past eleven, and then her manner almost confirmed my fears. For though usually well-behaved and exact, she did not attempt to make any excuse for being late, but looked at me impudently as if she knew that she had me at her mercy. And this, indeed, may be so. Sweyn was called out before the girl asked to go, and did not return until nearly twelve, so he knew nothing of this affair, yet

the moment he came in he detected a change in me, and could hardly believe that I did not feel unwell. "I can't understand it," he said. "You never looked better, at any rate recently, than you did this afternoon ; and now——" he paused and looked in my face anxiously as he laid his fingers on my wrist, "There is something wrong here that my art cannot fathom."

'Oh, would that it were within the scope of medical science to fathom my disease —even if it were to find that within a few weeks my life must end ! Oh, my darling love, that I might die in your arms with my shame undiscovered, that you might look back without reproach upon this little space of joy !

* * * * *

'I am ashamed of my cowardice when I think of the trifles that have alarmed me, and how gravely I distress my watchful, loving

Sweyn by foolishly frightening myself. Eliza (the housemaid) goes about her work precisely the same as before going to Eaton Street the other night, and there is nothing in her manner to indicate even suspicion of my secret. She is a good-looking girl, and possibly did not go to Eaton Street at all—only making her mother's illness an excuse to go out with a sweetheart. She was late in returning, and possibly had made up her mind to give me warning if I scolded her ; that would account for the impudent expression in her face, if it really existed ; but that may all have been the creation of my guilty fear. I must be bold, if only for his sake.

'Let me put it at the worst and face the situation. Discovery will come ; an end to these days of happiness snatched from Fate is inevitable ; and, well, what then ? Is the fear of death to destroy the delight of living ? If these dear days are to be brief, shall I not

devote every moment to enjoyment, and leave care for the night when there is no more joy to have?

* * * * *

'I have been happier, and Sweyn has been happier, since I took my resolution to face my danger boldly, and live for the present, without thinking of the past or future. Yet I would not like to grow wickedly indifferent to my fault, for that might lead me to commit others. But how can I grow hard or wicked with Sweyn's love to warm and soften my heart—such an example as his life to sustain a reverence for truth and goodness? To-day we received our first visit—the wife and daughters of Dr. —— calling upon us. I made up my mind to like them before I went into the drawing-room, and so I think won them over to liking me. When they were gone, Sweyn kissed my hand, and told me he was proud of me.

'Proud of me, my darling! If I went through this ordeal well and came out triumphant, if I behaved like a lady, it was through thinking that the finest gentleman in the whole world is my husband. For you are my husband, my darling Sweyn: not by the law of man, but by the law of God —by every sentiment and feeling that can sanctify and make marriage holy; and you alone are my husband.

* * * * *

'To-day, on going to the press for a duster, I found a number of *Diogenes* lying underneath the pile. It seemed most unlikely that Eliza or any of the servants would buy a paper of that kind, and I took it up, thinking that possibly it had been brought from Sweyn's room. It was open at the column of "Passing Glances," devoted to the movements of society people, and the first name that met my eye was my husband's. With anxious interest I

read the paragraph. It told how the practice of the late Dr. Hunt had been taken up by Dr. Sweyn Meredith, and concluded with a brief, well-deserved encomium upon Sweyn's professional ability and personal excellence.

'The next paragraph ran thus :

'"To the general public, however, Dr. Meredith is chiefly interesting as having lately married Miss Viola Dancaster, the charming lady who astonished all London a few months since by her beauty and daring. Dr. Meredith was present at Olympia at the time of the accident, which, but for his skill, would have proved fatal to the young *equestrienne*. She owed him her life ; she has given it to him. There are idyls even in Harley Street."

'My first feeling on reading this paragraph was one of terror ; my first impulse to take away the paper and destroy it, all my old fears of Eliza reviving, for I could

not doubt that the paper belonged to her—she usually arranging the house linen. My marriage was announced in a way to attract attention, my previous name and my present address given to direct the pursuit of enemies. But this feeling gave place to exultation when I discovered that the paper was more than a month old ; for reflecting that these periodicals are never bought and scarcely ever looked at later than the week they are issued, I may reasonably conclude that all danger is past. And this again shows the folly of giving way to alarm. If I had known of this public announcement when it appeared I should have had scarcely a day's peace of mind since.'

CHAPTER XLVI.

One morning Johnson, the man-servant, came to Nessa and said:

'If you please, mum, there's a pusson wants to see you—a female.'

'What does she want?' asked Nessa, ever ready to take alarm, despite her resolutions.

'She says it's private affairs, mum.'

'Where is she?'

'Well, mum, she's on the doorstep at present. She looks such a very shady person—if you'll excuse me—that I didn't think it safe to leave her in the hall with the humberellas.'

'Did she give any name?

'Redman—Mrs. Redman I believe she called herself, mum.'

Nessa had purposely turned to the table on which she was arranging flowers as she put the question, and it was well she did so, for her face as she heard the reply would have furnished gossip for the kitchen had Johnson seen it.

'Not at home, mum,' the man suggested, as Nessa stood silently fingering the flowers before her.

With an effort Nessa forced herself to answer with a steady voice:

'I will come down; show her into the morning-room.'

As the door closed behind the man, Nessa turned from the table, the flowers slipping from her fingers and scattering on the floor unnoticed by her.

'At last—at last!' she gasped. 'O God,

give me strength and guide me, for I am weak, and know not what to do!'

She stood with her chin sunk upon her breast, and her fingers clasped till she heard the door of the morning-room close; then, spurred by the dread of Sweyn returning before she had got the woman out of the house, she started from her attitude of helpless dejection, and with an expression of fixed determination in her face ran downstairs and entered the morning-room. Her step was so light and swift, her entrance so sudden, that Mrs. Redmond was surprised with her hand in the opened drawer of a cabinet.

'I'm looking at the pretty things you've got here,' she said, in a hoarse, grating voice, scarcely above a whisper. 'What's the matter, chummie? Aren't you glad to see me?' she added, as Nessa shrank away at her approach.

The woman was inconceivably altered. Her

dress and the remnants of flashy finery upon her were frayed, mud-stained, faded, and puckered with exposure to rain; her hair had returned to its natural hue and texture of dull tow; she had made no attempt to 'make up' her face; there was disease in the dull, leaden eyes, the purple orbits, and the yellow folds of skin that hung loose and watery from her prominent cheek-bones. But these signs of physical and moral degradation repelled Nessa less than the vindictive, sinister expression in her face.

'What do you want?' Nessa asked, with horror in her hushed voice.

'I'll tell you what I want directly, chummie. Give me your hand.'

'No; keep away from me. You are my enemy: I know it. If you come near me I will——'

'You will have me put out of doors. That's what you meant to say, only you

thought better of it. You daren't do it. You're afraid of me, or you wouldn't have let me into your fine house—you sneaking, cowardly little devil! You could come to me fast enough when you needed help, but when I need a lift, you can think about turning me out in the street. That's your gratitude for all I've done to help you out of your scrapes. Look at me! I came out of the hospital yesterday. I've spent the night in the streets, and my last coppers went for a glass of spirits to keep body and soul together this morning. Don't imagine I want your pity. I'd sooner be carried to the workhouse than ask you for charity. I come here to take what you owe me.'

'What I owe you!'

'That's it. When I gave up my house and everything to help you, I gave you half I had. I saved your life. I saved you from beggary. I put you into the International,

and was a willing stepping-stone to your present position. We agreed to share whatever fortune came to us. I have kept my part of the agreement; now you've got to keep yours.'

'You shall have half of my fortune when it is mine to give.'

'Oh, that game's up. I've been fool enough to play for those stakes while I thought I could play the game out, but I'm not such a fool as to go on at it now. I shall be dead in six months. They gave me less than that at the hospital; but I'll live six months with care and the money to buy what I know will keep me alive. If you were to offer me the whole of your fortune—when you get it, and required a paper to bind you to it, which is more—I wouldn't change it for what I mean to get out of you now.'

'I have nothing,' Nessa said, extending her hands in despair.

'Nothing!' croaked the woman, choking with fury, for she had actually worked herself up to believe in her own false representations. 'Nothing! You dare tell me that, with those rings on your fingers. Understand me—I am not a fool, and not to be cheated. You've caught this swell doctor, and I'm going to have my share of the plunder. We go halves—do you hear? halves! And now we'll begin the division. Give me one of those gem rings and that wedding-ring. You can replace that with the other one—you don't want two.'

Nessa shook her head in speechless dismay, clasping the rings Sweyn had given her, and which she would not part with for all the world.

'What! you stick at a trifle like that?' pursued Mrs. Redmond. 'You must be pretty dense if you don't understand me, for I speak plain enough. I tell you I'll have half of

everything you have. For convenience, I'll take it in instalments; but I won't leave this house till I've got stuff to make up for the weeks and months of misery I've been brought to through you.'

Nessa saw no possibility of escape; after standing for a minute in speechless indecision, she turned to the door. Something in the look of her eyes alarmed Mrs. Redmond.

'What are you going to do?' she asked, stepping forward hastily and setting her foot against the door.

'I am not going to do what you want me to do,' Nessa replied without faltering; 'that is impossible. What I shall do,' she added with dreamy wonder—'what I shall do I know no more than you. But I shall know when Dr. Meredith returns.'

'What! does he know you're Anderson's wife?' asked the woman, in her turn dismayed.

Nessa looked at her in silent scorn.

'What do you mean?' asked Mrs. Redmond impatiently.

'Do you think he would suffer me to live in his house if he knew I were not his wife?'

'I dare say he could swallow his fine feelings, like the rest of men, if it suited him,' Mrs. Redmond sneered. 'But I suppose it *wouldn't* suit him, as he's a doctor, and has to keep up a character for respectability. But he'd make you some sort of allowance, surely.'

Nessa turned away in disgust, and covered her face with her hands in shame.

'He must give you something—he's a gentleman, I suppose.'

'He is a gentleman, and could not insult even an enemy. He will not offer to pay me——'

The passionate sentence ended there, and she burst into tears.

Mrs. Redmond looked on for a moment in

vexed perplexity. Delicate sensibilities were quite beyond her comprehension; but she had the sense to see that she had gone too far in her furious determination to extort blackmail, and that if she did not restore hope and confidence to Nessa, her own gain would be of an unpleasant kind. She had a pretty sound conception that Dr. Meredith would not content himself with merely turning her out of his house; he would more likely detain her until the police took her in charge for further examination.

'Look here, chummie; don't take on like this,' she said, endeavouring to soften her grating voice to a soothing tone as she laid her hand on Nessa's arm.

Nessa shrank away from that repulsive touch, and dashed the tears from her eyes.

'Come, chummie, come,' whined the woman, setting her head aside with abject entreaty in her unhealthy face, 'don't look at me like

that. I know I've gone too far, and said things I didn't mean; but you must make some allowance for my misery and need. You see what a poor, miserable wretch I am,' she pleaded, catching at the pity that dawned in the girl's face. 'Lord knows I don't want to upset you, and part you from this nice, kind doctor—why should I? My only hope of escaping from the workhouse and living a few months depends on my getting a little help from you. Why, I hung about the corner of the street over an hour not to call on you till I saw the doctor was well out of the way in his carriage. Look here, chummie, don't you think of telling him, if it's to put an end to your happiness and bring you to shame. Why should you? You were only half married to Anderson, and that half can't be legal, as he was out of his mind. I take my oath I didn't know it then. Look at me —it's such misery as mine you plunge yourself

into by giving way to this foolish impulse. You always were impulsive—you know you were—and repented it afterwards. And if you are really fond of this doctor, you may think that it won't be a very pleasant thing for him——'

'I am thinking of him,' Nessa said.

'Well, look how it would damage him in his profession—a scandal of this sort!'

Nessa assented; but she was not thinking of the scandal or professional position, but of how he would sit alone in his room at night, and the grief that would wring his heart.

'Then why should you do such a foolish thing for nothing, when you may both live happily till the end of your lives? Hexham's taken Anderson back to America; Cummings has got a berth in Scotland, and not another soul in the world is living to trouble you, for it isn't likely I shall bother you. All I

want is a little bit now and then.' She looked round the room greedily. 'There's such a lot of things in a house like this—plate and one thing and another—one article or two would never be missed out of so many.'

'No, no! that is impossible,' said Nessa in horror; 'nothing shall persuade me to rob him.'

Mrs. Redmond, at a loss how to manage the squeamish girl, bit her lips in silence for a moment; then:

'You don't mean to say you've got nothing,' she said. 'Look here, doesn't he allow you money for housekeeping?'

'It is *his* money.'

'Oh, bother!' Mrs. Redmond was losing temper again in this trying exercise of finding excuses for Nessa as well as for herself. 'He can't expect you to account for every farthing. He must allow you something over for little expenses of your own—pin-money, and so

on. And if he didn't, certainly you could economize, and so save something for me.'

Nessa received money for housekeeping—more than she needed. With pride she had shown Sweyn the surplus left after paying all the week's bills, and he had told her to put it by for a rainy day. Well, surely, she thought, he could not object, if he knew it, to her giving what she had to supply the needs of this woman. She put her hand in her pocket and produced the purse in which she kept this surplus.

'I think I may give you this ; it is all I have.'

'At present—but you'll save some more for me, won't you ?' the woman whined, taking the purse and opening it. There was gold inside. 'Don't look frightened. I shan't come again for a long time : not till this is all gone. And I shall take precious good care to come when it's quite safe. That

reminds me that I'd better go before the servants get curious. You can tell your husband in their hearing that I'm an old servant of yours. Now I'll be off.' And as she opened the door she croaked loud enough to be heard by any listening servant, and with a wink at Nessa, 'I'm deeply grateful for your kindness, Mrs. Meredith, ma'am. And if ever you should want anyone to help in the house, I shall be only too glad to come: you know I was never above a bit of honest, hard work.'

Round the corner of the street she joined Cummings. He stood there waiting for her, seedy and down-at-heel, with his hands in his pockets and a hang-dog look in his face.

'Well, how did you get on—what have you screwed out of her?' he asked, falling in with her quick pace.

'Four or five shillings — that's all,' she

answered gloomily. 'It's no go screwing her.'

'She'll have to be screwed.'

'I'll tell you what will happen then. She'll tell the doctor everything, and bolt without a penny. She's likely enough to do it without screwing.'

'Well, what's to be done? I've ruined myself through this cursed job.'

'I'll tell you what must be done. We must go for the big stakes. You know—we must do what we were talking about last night. Have you been round to the mansions?'

'Yes.'

'Well?'

'Hexham's still there.'

'And the madman?'

'Yes.'

'That's all right. We'll get him out of Hexham's hands somehow.'

CHAPTER XLVII.

When Sweyn returned from his round that afternoon, Nessa met him in the hall, and, leading him into his own room, said :

'I want to tell you at once, love, something that has happened while you were away. The woman I lived with at the time of my accident——'

'Mrs. Merrivale?'

'Yes ; she called upon me. She is very ill, very poor, and she has no friends or occupation. She wanted money, and I gave her all I had.'

'And so you need some more to go on with, eh?' he suggested cheerfully.

'Oh no, no, no! The money you let me

have for the week is upstairs. I only had my purse with the savings I have made in my pocket. I gave her that.'

'Well?' he said interrogatively.

'That is all I can tell you, love,' she answered nervously, stroking his hand as she looked into his face, with sad, serious eyes.

He laughed and hugged her to his side.

'Why, you dear, mysterious little soul, that's nothing. I thought you had something terrible to relate: that solemn, grave, beautiful face filled me with all sorts of apprehensions. You don't regret giving your savings, do you?'

'No; but I felt that I must tell you all—all that I could tell you.'

'Believe me, I want to know no more than that, dear wife. But we will not dismiss this subject without another word. I should think Mrs. Merrivale would call on you again. It's

natural she should, you know.' His eye twinkled with suppressed mirth. 'That sort of thing is liable to become tedious to you, and it must be uncomfortable to her whenever she calls to accept gifts. Now, don't you think it would be more pleasant for all parties if we lent her a certain sum to invest in a small business that would give her occupation and restore a feeling of independence ?'

'Sweyn, Sweyn—dear, generous Sweyn !' she sobbed, winding her arms round his neck, and with closed eyes drawing his face down to hers.

She was exuberantly gay after this little scene. It seemed as if forgiving Heaven were smiling upon her, and all the clouds rolling away over the horizon. Her husband, Hexham, and Cummings all gone ; Mrs. Redmond settled and content as she must be with the liberal provision promised

by Sweyn—what was there to fear? Nothing could trouble her peace; no shadow of the past fall upon this happy future.

Unfortunately, Mrs. Redmond did not know of the good fortune awaiting her. By ignoring the good policy of truth and happiness, she could not foresee the happy turn taken through Nessa's departure from her counsel. Nessa was anxious to impart the good news to her—to make known her dear Sweyn's generosity. A fortnight passed; Mrs. Redmond had not repeated her visit. Nessa took that as a sign of the woman's moderation, and became more and more convinced that her peril was past—poor fool!

She had a room of her own, but she preferred Sweyn's study when she was not puzzling very hard over some self-imposed task. She was now for ever striving to

'improve' herself. In her husband's sanctum she could feast her eyes on the evidence of his prodigious acquirements in the rows of scientific books he understood, and the curious cases of instruments on the shelf, which at one time she shuddered to look at, and there was a prevalent odour of tobacco, which she loved, because tobacco was dear to him. She was seated in his chair one afternoon, when Johnson came in by the door from the passage.

'If you please, mum, there are two pussons to see the doctor—males; and they wish to know how long it will be before he's in.'

'He will be in by five o'clock,' Nessa replied, looking at the timepiece. It was now a quarter-past four. 'Did you say they were gentlemen?'

'Males, mum. Patients, appearantly. One of them looks very po'rly—a gentleman;

the other looks like a messenger, or something of that, sent to take care of him. Had to help him in by the arm.'

'Show them into the consulting-room, if they choose to wait.'

'I have done so, mum. They are in there now.'

They were there—Cummings, the 'messenger or something of that,' with his ear to the door at the end of the room which opened into the doctor's study; his hand on the arm of the gentleman, Richard Anderson. When Johnson entered by the other door, to tell them the doctor would be home in three-quarters of an hour, both were seated on the couch, the gentleman with his eyes closed.

Cummings nodded, with a glance at Anderson, to signify that they would wait, and Johnson withdrew.

'It's all right,' whispered Cummings.

'You've got three-quarters of an hour to get rid of the devil.'

Anderson was on the alert in a moment.

'He's in there—the devil you sold your soul to, you know,' Cummings continued.

Anderson nodded eagerly.

'The one I've been hunting for ever since I got out of hell?' he asked, putting his lips close to Cumming's ear.

'Yes. He's at his old tricks again—taken the shape of a beautiful woman.'

Anderson nodded and winked, a cunning grin baring his clenched teeth.

'It's no good trying the long game again,' said Cummings.

Anderson pursed up his lips and shook his head vehemently.

'You failed last time through being too slow.'

Anderson assented with a nod and furious scowl.

'You'll have to do it sharp. Hexham will never let you out of the waistcoat if he catches you before it's done.'

Anderson started to his feet, and dipped his hand in his pocket with desperate haste.

Cummings rose also, laying a hand upon his arm sharply.

'Don't be a fool and lose your last chance by want of caution. You can be sharp without being rash; you must wait for your opportunity.'

Anderson snatched his arm away impatiently.

'Let me alone,' he muttered; 'do you think I don't know all that?'

'Wait a bit; there may be more than one in the next room. The right one may not be there. If she's gone, we may have to wait for another chance.'

He went to the door opening into the study, and laying hold firmly of the handle, turned

it by imperceptible degrees till the catch was withdrawn from the lock, and the door, yielding to the slight pull, slowly gaped. With the same noiseless movement he turned the handle back to its original position, as he perceived Nessa through the opening seated before the fireplace with her back to the door. He saw her face mirrored in the inclined glass over the chimneypiece. Anderson, craning over his shoulder, saw it also, and with instant perception that the glass which revealed her to them would reveal them to her if she chanced to look up, quickly crouched down, drawing Cummings back with an agony of apprehension in his face. The two, bending low, nodded to each other significantly.

'Are you ready?' breathed Cummings, livid with horror of the thing he was doing.

Anderson replied by a nod, and slid silently down on all-fours.

'Wait until I'm outside before you begin. I

must bolt the street door for fear of Hexham,' Cummings whispered.

Anderson took no notice of the caution, but with cat-like stealth drew the door wider open to permit of his passing in. At the last glance back as he slipped out into the hall, Cummings saw that Anderson was already half through the door. With a rapid step he crossed the hall, opened the street door, and without pausing to close it, ran down the street.

It was Mrs. Redmond who waited round the corner this time. His face told the tale the moment he came in sight. Without waiting for him to join her, she hurried on in the direction he was taking. Overtaking her, he dropped into a rapid walk, to which she with difficulty accommodated her pace.

'Has he done it?' she asked.

'It's all over by this time,' he answered.

They said no more, but hurried on, panting

for breath. There was a 'bus passing the end of the street. Cummings hailed it hoarsely, and both ran to overtake it. No other passengers were on the top. When she had recovered breath, Mrs. Redmond asked for particulars, and Cummings gave them in brief. She was discontented, even though accident had favoured their design beyond expectation.

'Supposing he does not do it after all?' she said petulantly.

'Then we shall not be worse off than we were before. It was only an experiment, and it's turned out ever so much better than I thought it would. What else did you want?'

'You shouldn't have come away so soon. Time enough to bolt when he'd done it.'

'And been caught.'

'There was no danger in that. It would be seen that he was a maniac; his name wouldn't be known.'

'And Hexham, when the thing got in the papers?'

'He wouldn't have stirred in the matter, to take the responsibility for having let the man get out of his hands twice.'

'I wasn't going to risk that. Besides, I tell you, she can't escape.'

'For all you know. If she does, we've lost our tool, and shan't get him again; that's sure. Much better have looked about, and brought him away, saying you'd call another day. You might have found out her dressing-room, and got him in there next time, if you hadn't the courage to see it through. Or if you'd followed my plan of drawing her into some hotel, and shutting her in a room with him.'

'Oh, shut up, you croaking old—— Wait till the evening papers come out, then you'll see whether I'm a fool or not. Get down. We'll take that other 'bus.'

Nessa, bending over her German Grammar, heard a movement in the direction of the consulting-room ; but, knowing patients were awaiting the return of Sweyn, she disregarded them—only it seemed to her that sounds were particularly distinct considering that the door was closed. She heard the street door shut, another door open—the further door of the consulting-room. But when she heard a rap at the door behind her, she raised her head, and, looking round, saw Johnson, with a look of perplexity in his face, in the entrance.

'I beg pardon, mum, but I was going to ask you if you had seen anything of the two pussons?'

'No ; I have seen nobody,' said Nessa, rising, and laying down her book.

'I thought you might, as this door is half open.'

'Are the gentlemen gone?' she asked in

astonishment, going to the door of the consulting-room.

'Clean gone, mum. I heard the street door open, and ran upstairs at once, and they must have heard me and took to their heels, for I see not a sign of anyone when I looked down the street.'

'What can it mean ?'

'Thieves, mum, that's what it means. I didn't like the look of the one in the long black coat—looked like one of those pussons that preaches in the parks, and the other was shamming sick for an excuse. They know the doctor goes out after lunch, and reckoned on getting his instruments or suthing out of the study ; but seeing you there were baulked in their puppos, and gave up the job. It's frequently done. My last master was robbed in that way, and he took care afterwards to lock the door of the study inside before he went out.'

The explanation was conclusive. Nessa left Johnson examining the periodicals on the table of the consulting-room, with a view to seeing if any had been taken, and, withdrawing into the study, turned the key in the lock as a precaution for the future. She glanced at the clock ; in a quarter of an hour, at the furthest, Sweyn would be home. There was just time to put her books away and set the room straight. The books packed on the shelf above Sweyn's beloved pipes, his chair pushed back in its customary place, she glanced round to see if anything else needed arranging. Then her eyes falling on the shelf in the case beyond the screen, she noticed with surprise that the velvet-lined lid of a box of instruments stood open. Crossing the room to examine more closely, she discovered that one of the long dissecting knives was gone from its place. Was it probable that one of the thieves had passed behind her, opened the

box, and taken the knife, she asked herself? It seemed hardly possible. Another supposition—that the thief, alarmed by the sound of Johnson entering the adjoining room, had found no time to escape, and had armed himself with the knife for defence—caused her to turn her eyes towards the recess behind the screen.

With a horror-stifled cry, she drew back on perceiving the dim figure of a man in the shadow of the screen, crouching as if to spring upon her with the gleaming knife in his hand. Breathless with terror, she drew back step by step towards the door of the consulting-room—the door into the passage lying beyond the screen—keeping her face towards the man, who, like a cat hesitating to spring upon the prey it is uncertain of reaching, shifted his position, and stole upon her step for step.

Suddenly it flashed upon Nessa's recollection

that she had locked the door ; to open it she must turn her back upon this man, and expose herself to his attack. The quivering of the knife showed her that the man was nerving himself for the spring. She strove to scream, but the horror which prompted the cry silenced it in her paralyzed throat. There was a long table in the middle of the room ; she thought of it in this last extremity, and just as the man bent suddenly down to spring, she turned, and in a moment placed herself upon the further side of it.

As she reached this temporary barrier she looked back. The man had come from the shadow of the screen, and stood now facing the light. She recognised him, distorted as his face was with demoniacal fury, and faintly gasped :

'My husband !'

He seemed to perceive the paralyzing fascination he exercised over her, and drew

stealthily upon her until he reached the table, and there again he stood, undetermined whether to chase her round it or to vault across. In that moment the street door closed, and Nessa's strained perception recognised Sweyn's step in the passage.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

Anderson heard the sounds also, and instantly the whole expression of the man changed from savage ferocity to cowering apprehension, the fear of Hexham overcoming the craving to rid himself of a supposed tormentor. The hand with the knife dropped to his side; his head shrank between his shoulders, and he looked wildly round for a means of escape. Nessa, seeing her advantage, flew swift as thought to the door behind her, turned the key, opened it, and dropped fainting into Sweyn's arms as he stepped quickly to meet her.

'My poor child, what is the matter?' he asked.

She made no answer ; her head rolled back from his shoulder with the waxen hue on it which he had seen when he despaired of her life.

'There's been thieves in the place, sir ; that's what's frightened the missis,' explained the sapient Johnson.

'Water, quick !' said Sweyn.

He carried her to the couch and laid her there at full length.

Johnson returned with water, the two maids following at his heels, and the cook peering in from the passage door.

Sweyn dashed a little water in Nessa's face and took other means to restore her, while Johnson in a low tone narrated all that he knew with regard to the visits of the 'two pussons,' to which the women servants listened for perhaps the tenth time, agape with curiosity. As soon as Nessa showed signs of returning consciousness, Sweyn by a gesture

sent the servants away, and raising Nessa into a sitting posture seated himself beside her, supporting her with his arm. She looked about her wildly, and finding him beside her clasped his hand and murmured eagerly :

'It is you, love !'

'Yes, I ; your husband, darling. Don't be frightened. There's no one to harm you. I am here. Don't trouble to think about it. I know all. A couple of pilfering thieves came into the place and sneaked out when they saw you protecting our goods and chattels. Well, that shows that they are not very terrible at any rate. There, now you feel stronger.'

She pressed his hand for response. Her palm was wet, her fingers icy cold, and she trembled violently.

'You're cold, aren't you ? We'll have a cosy hour in the big chair before dinner : is there a fire in the study ?'

He rose as he asked the question as if he intended to go in and see. She clung to his hand, restraining him with almost frantic anxiety.

'We won't go in there, if you would wish not. You are shaken and unnerved by this imaginary danger. It will be better still if you will lie down for a little while. Let me take you up.'

She assented to this silently and by gesture, for terror seemed to have deprived her of the power to speak. With overwhelming dread, she passed the entrance of the study on her way to the staircase. Only Sweyn's powerful arm sustained her trembling form. Her room was the first from the head of the stairs; the door stood open. Sweyn led her in, and having placed her in her favourite lounge, turned back the bed-clothes and arranged the pillows, while she looked on bewildered and speechless. He lifted her up and laid her on

the bed; then he covered her, talking with cheerful kindness the while. He sat down by the bedside, continuing to chat until he noticed that her eyes closed. She was striving to control her tumultuous ideas, and decide what she ought to do.

Presently she noticed that he had ceased to speak, and opening her eyes she saw him going noiselessly towards the door. The idea that he was about to go down into the study where her husband waited with that horrible knife, brought a cry of terror to her lips, and when he turned quickly to find the cause, he found that she had thrown back the clothes and sprung from the bed.

'My dear, dear love, what is it?' he murmured soothingly, as he ran back to her side and took her again to his breast.

'You—you must not go down there,' she faltered.

'I will stay up beside you if you wish it.'

He seated her and himself upon the side of the bed, with a dawning conviction that something more than the cause attributed by Johnson underlay this unaccountable agitation.

'Darling,' he said with gentle firmness, 'you must tell me what has happened—what it is that——'

He stopped, for it was clear that Nessa was not listening to him—not even thinking of him. Her eyes were fixed on something near the window, whilst her bosom rose and fell quickly to her painful gasping for breath. What was it she saw there to alarm her, he asked himself, looking strenuously in the direction of her steadfast regard?

Certainly the window curtain did bulge out, taking the form of a man's shoulder; he rose sharply, resolved by a movement to dispel her fears if this were the cause.

With a scream of terror she sprang up,

and throwing herself before him, clutched his hand, while she turned her bosom towards the man with the knife whom she knew well had taken refuge behind the curtain.

The peril was real enough, as Sweyn saw the next instant when the curtain was swept back and Anderson sprang out with the dissecting knife in his restless hand.

With the swift, decisive judgment of a man trained to meet sudden emergencies, Sweyn measured the danger and his own resources. Passing his left arm quickly round Nessa as she stood between him and the knife, he swung her from before him, and taking one stride forward, with his right hand seized Anderson's arm as he raised it to strike; then with his disengaged left, he grasped the maniac by the throat, thrust him back, and pinned him choking against the wall. It was done in an instant.

For a few seconds, Anderson writhed and

struggled furiously to free himself from the iron grip, and then, exhausted by the effort, purple in the face under the garotte, he let the knife slip from his nervous fingers. Nessa dashed forward, and flung it to the further end of the room; but the danger was past. As Sweyn relaxed his left hand, Anderson dropped to the ground like a lump of clay. Kneeling beside him, Sweyn glanced anxiously at Nessa.

'What shall I do?' she asked helpfully.

'Fetch me the long bath towel. There's a brave woman,' he added, as she brought it quickly to him. 'I might have known that you wouldn't give in while your help was needed. You see, there's no danger now; the poor wretch is as feeble as a child. Double the towel; now lay it crosswise under his shoulders—a little lower—so. We must fasten his arms down for the present, in case of another outbreak. Are you there, John-

son?' he asked, catching the sound of a subdued cough in the passage.

'Yussir; I thought I heard a noise, sir?'

'Quite right. You did. Come here and help me.'

'Lord, sir! you've got one of the thieves there,' said Johnson, in astonishment.

'You mustn't say that of a patient. Now, then, lift him up on his feet. Have you been in the profession, Johnson, ever since you wore buttons, and not learnt the symptoms of this poor fellow's disease? There, now; help him into a spare room, and stay with him till I come.'

He talked in this strain with a specific object—making light of the affair to give Nessa confidence until his hands were free to minister to her wants. All the time he was occupied with Anderson he kept a keen eye on her, aware that her strength would

give out as the excitement abated. He saw her totter to the dressing-table, and rest her hands upon it for support; she was swaying to and fro with closed eyes as he turned from Anderson.

'Now it's your turn, my brave little wife,' he said, and taking her in his arms he again carried her to the bed, and laid her down. She opened her eyes, and smiled at him faintly, but with ineffable love, from her pillow, and then covered her face with her hands. From head to foot she trembled violently. Sweyn piled on the blankets, and put hot water to her feet; but for an hour nothing availed to subdue the convulsive quivering of her frame. She never spoke—never took her hands from her face.

It was no time to ask questions: Sweyn was concerned only for her recovery from the shock. Her symptoms led him to fear the development of brain fever. When he spoke

to her it was with a view to soothing her and removing any cause of agitation.

'I've been to see my other patient,' he said, in the course of the evening. 'He is quite calm, poor fellow, and grateful for kind treatment. I suspect he has been in the hands of someone who doesn't understand the proper management of such sufferers. He is as reasonable as a man in his condition can be; but I can learn nothing from him with regard to his friends, residence, and general circumstances. He cannot even tell his name. An utter loss of memory is one of the chief characteristics of his disease. He seems absolutely at a loss to account for his coming to the house, and I believe is equally unconscious who brought him. It's clear that he has friends. His dress, and the fact that he is not in an asylum, prove that. If I knew who they were, I could send for them at once. But as that seems beyond hoping

for, I suppose I must communicate with the police.'

Nessa pushed back the clothes in which her face had been buried, and looking up into Sweyn's face, with earnest entreaty, said :

'Must you do that?'

'Well, I suppose I ought to do it for the sake of his friends.'

'But, for my sake, don't,' she pleaded.

He concealed the astonishment this demand created and replied, smiling :

'It was chiefly for your sake I wished to remove him from the house. But if——'

'Wait till the morning—only till the morning, my darling,' she prayed, catching his hand.

'With all my heart, if you wish it, love.'

She kissed his hand, and her tears trickled down upon it—tears of joy and gratitude for this last brief respite.

CHAPTER XLIX.

Nessa only rose to make her toilette for the night with the aid of her maid. When Sweyn came up late in the evening and, bending over her anxiously, took her wrist in his hand, she said:

'Don't be anxious about me, love; I am quite calm; the trembling has all gone.'

'Yes, thank God, you will do now. Your wonderful constitution is proof against every attack; but you need a quiet night, so we won't talk about anything.'

'No, we will leave it all to teli to-morrow morning. It is early yet, isn't it?'

'Nine o'clock.'

She smiled, making a mental calculation of

the hours that yet remained before she must tell all, and lose this dear, dear friend for ever.

'I have some stiff reading to do. Shall I bring my book up here?' he asked.

'Do, love. Bring the little table and your reading quite close to me. I will not say a word.'

He disposed the lamp upon the table by her bedside as she wished, and drew his chair up so that he could see her face when he turned. Then he lowered the shade that the light might not fall upon her pillow and settled himself down to read. She drew, by insensible degrees, as near to him as it was possible, and feasted her eyes upon that down-bent, thoughtful face which to her was the type of all that was beautiful and good in the world. He sat there reading for hours; she never made an audible movement; whenever he turned he found her eyes wide open, meeting his, and a smile broke over her face—the sweetest,

saddest smile. Once he felt a touch upon his arm, and disregarded it, but later on in moving he felt it again, and looking down discovered that her hand had crept out and touched the sleeve of his coat.

When midnight was passed he said, half closing the book and shaking his head gravely :

'Not yet asleep, wife ?'

'Not yet,' she answered. 'But I will try to sleep. Kiss me, my darling, before I close my eyes.' He knelt by the bedside, laid his face upon her pillow, and drew her towards him.

She closed her eyes resolutely, but he knew by her breathing, by her face still turned towards him, that she had not fallen asleep. Towards daybreak, indeed, he perceived that she was less composed than she had been earlier. The muscles of her lips moved involuntarily at times, and there were other

signs of some mental agitation which perplexed and troubled him. What project was she working out in her mind ?

He put out the light, and himself fell asleep. When he awoke, it was broad daylight, and Nessa was now unmistakably asleep, her lips parted, her hands folded below her chin, as if in prayer. In the half light her hair looked black against the pillow ; her face looked white against her hair.

Sweyn was seated at the breakfast-table when the door opened and Nessa came down in her dressing-gown, her hair simply gathered in a knot. He detected something unusual in her manner the moment she entered the room —a certain nervous rapidity of movement, a wavering look in the eyes, ordinarily so steadfast and calm in their regard.

'I hoped you would sleep for another hour,' he said as they met.

'I am ashamed to be so late. And now I

have hurried down like this because I felt so anxious to tell you what—what I did not tell you last night.'

'Oh, about that poor fellow upstairs. I went in to see him just now. He hasn't woke yet, happily. Well, we can talk about him over a cup of tea——'

'No, dear, I want to tell you at once—before anything.'

'Very good ; we'll have it out at once. I talked about communicating with the police, and you asked me to wait till this morning ; that's where we left off.'

'Yes, we left off there because I could not tell you then what I must tell you now. He —that man'—with her hands upon his shoulders she pressed her face close to him that he might not read the lie in it—'he is *my brother!*'

'Your brother !' he exclaimed, holding her from him at arm's length.

She made no reply, but dropped her head to escape his eyes in an agony of shame, believing that he had already detected her in this deliberate falsehood.

'Your brother?' he repeated, and then in a joyful accent, 'Why, this explains everything, my poor, tortured love! Your reticence with regard to the past, your shrinking dread, your mysterious embarrassment — everything. I understand now why you fainted in my arms, why you would not have me go into the study, or leave you in your room. After the attack I suspected that you had seen the man in my study, and that he had taken advantage of the servants being drawn there to escape by the stairs and hide in the first room he came to above, but it was inexplicable why you had not told me of his being down there. Nor could I at all understand why you would not allow me to send him away from the house. All is clear enough now. You thought you

ought to have told me that there was insanity in your family before I made you my wife. You found it still more impossible to tell me afterwards, and this has been a constant burden on your conscience. Don't cry, love.' He drew her to his breast and kissed her again and again in joyful forgiveness. 'This very weakness that betrayed you into silence is but another proof of your love for me. It is indeed a terrible thing to be tainted with this dreadful disease, but your brother's case is not so bad as you believe. If I know anything of madness, his disorder is the result of accident, and not inherited. Your blood is as pure as mine. Your father and mother are perfectly sane, aren't they?'

'They died while I was quite a little child.'

'Your brother has not always been in this condition?'

'I cannot say. I have only known him a few months. Oh, do not ask me to tell you

more !' she cried impulsively, for it cut her to the heart to take advantage of his faith and generous love. 'Promise me you will make me tell you no more.'

'Not a word. There; sit down here and let me pour out some tea for you.'

He kept his promise, and avoided speaking of her brother as much as possible, for he saw that she was restless, unhappy, and painfully self-conscious, and she would not, could not, look him in the face. This perplexed him now that he had conceived the cause of her embarrassment removed.

Two or three days passed, and then one afternoon he came to her with delight in his face.

'I have good news for you, dear,' he said. 'Dr. Channing has been here, and we have had a long consultation over your brother. He agrees with me entirely that the primary

cause of insanity in this case is accident, and that the disease has grown to its present terrible proportions through neglect if not wrong treatment. Your brother has not the appearance of an hereditary maniac ; the symptoms all indicate a merely temporary derangement. I think we may confidently hope that your brother may be cured.'

'I am glad of that,' Nessa said gravely, without raising her head.

'I have asked Channing to bring Dr. Hewet. He, you know, is the greatest living authority upon mental disease. If he is of our opinion, that your brother may be restored to reason, all your distress will be at an end, my poor darling.'

She made no reply. She could not even pretend to feel relieved.

She would have had still less cause for relief if Sweyn had told her all that passed between him and Dr. Channing.

'We shall have to find out how long this has been coming on,' Dr. Channing had said.

'I don't see how we're to do that,' Sweyn replied. 'My wife can give no account of him before a quite recent period, and in her present dangerously nervous condition I fear to press her for any explanation.'

'Who has been his keeper?'

'I wish I knew. He's responsible for a deal. I think his name must be Hexham, or something like that; it is the only name my brother-in-law seems to remember, and always he speaks of him with fear.'

'Hexham, Hexham,' repeated Dr. Channing reflectively, as he felt in his pocket for his note-book. 'Why, that reminds me that a man with a name like that has been inquiring at Bartholomew's whether a man of unsound mind has been brought in there. I made a note of it at his request. Here it is. "John Hexham, 25G, Victoria Mansions."'

'I'll hunt him up to-day,' said Sweyn; and he went out in the afternoon with that purpose, but saying nothing about it to Nessa.

A few days after that, Dr. Channing brought the great specialist, and they held an exhaustive consultation over Anderson. When they had come to a definite conclusion, Sweyn sought his wife.

'You have to decide a very grave question, love,' he said. 'Our opinion is unanimous that your brother's reason may be restored. A tumour, probably the result of a blow, has formed under the cap of the skull. Dr. Hewet has determined its exact position. It presses upon the organ of memory, and is the cause of all the terrible manifestations we have observed. If the tumour is allowed to remain, your brother must grow worse, and his sufferings be indefinitely prolonged. It is horrible to think what those sufferings may

lead to before death ends them. But the tumour may be removed. By a simple operation his sufferings may be quickly ended, and the disturbed organs will renew their functions. Not only reason, but memory will come back to him.'

'Memory?' said Nessa, in a voice that was hardly audible.

'Yes; events now perfectly obliterated from his mind may return to him.'

'He may know me.' Nessa said, in the same bated breath.

'Of course, an operation of this kind is not unattended with danger,' Sweyn pursued, disregarding his wife's suggestion; 'but in the hand of such a skilful operator as Dr. Hewet the danger is reduced to a minimum, and it is hardly greater than that of administering chloroform. Still, it is a case in which the operation must be sanctioned by the patient's nearest relation. You are his nearest relative;

and it is for you to decide whether or not the operation is to be performed.'

'If I refuse, he will never know me,' Nessa said to herself. 'If I agree to it, he will claim me as his wife.'

'You would like time to consider,' said Sweyn; 'time to think over the consequences?'

'No; I have done that,' she answered, still bending over the knitted and strained fingers in her lap.

'If the operation is successful, as I believe it must be, the difference to him will be the difference of heaven to hell.'

'And for me,' thought Nessa, 'the difference of hell to heaven.'

'Shall I say that you will give your decision to-morrow?' he asked.

'No; I will give it now,' she said, rising and speaking with firm distinctness. 'The operation shall be made.'

And as Sweyn left the room with this sanction, she said to herself:

'There is no escape.'

The operation was performed with complete success. Anderson awoke as if from a horrible nightmare. The relief from pain was instantaneous; memory slowly, surely returned.

And soon after Sweyn came to Nessa and said:

'He remembers his sister. He has asked to see you. Come.'

CHAPTER L.

James Redmond was at Grahame Towers, occupied in the prudent pursuit of making hay while the sun shone. As soon as it was discovered that Mrs. Redmond had failed to kill Nessa in the arena, he saw the folly of relying on further hopes in that direction. Destitution and the fear that Nessa would find friends before long to protect her interests, prompted him to return to the Towers, with a view to getting what he could from the estate before the hour came when he must bolt to escape arrest and punishment for his wrong-doing. He set about cutting timber wholesale. He would have sold every stick on the estate if he could have found a ready-

money customer. But the big timber merchants were cautious. There was something in the man's manner which excited their suspicions; they wanted to know too much about his right to dispose of the timber, and he could tell them too little to remove their scruples. His eagerness to get money down choked most of them off. The little dealers, however, were less punctilious; but their means would not allow them to buy the trees as they stood and pay ready money even at the large discount offered. And so though the trees fell day by day and the heavily-laden wains were constantly on the road to Knaresboro' very little money came in. He lived quite alone in the old house, in a hugger-mugger, slovenly, dirty, and miserable semi-savage way. He occupied the bedroom upstairs—slept there, cooked there, ate there in a stench of sour vessels, unwashed linen, foul tobacco, and stale beer. Every day added

to his moral degradation; yet despite the indifference which accompanies such self-abasement, he was not callous to the discomforts of his surroundings. His fall had been sudden. Within a recent period he had considered himself a smart man, and won a certain sort of admiration from barmaids, servant girls, and persons of that kind; now when he went into Knaresboro' in his mud-caked dogcart, driving an ungroomed, ragged pony, he was an object of derision.

'It's a cursed life,' he said to himself; 'but what's the odds? It's only for a time. When I do get the money for that timber I'll make up for all this drudgery and privation.'

One afternoon, having worried two pounds on account out of a weak-minded wheelwright in Knaresboro', he treated himself to a gallon of whisky, and with the stone jar and other purchases for the week in his cart, jogged home to the Towers. When he reached the

open space before the house, he found two visitors waiting for him—both seated on the low parapet of the terrace by the gate-house. One was his wife ; the other a man he had not the pleasure of knowing.

'What have you come here for?' he asked, drawing up at the gateway.

'Because there's nowhere better to go to,' answered his wife. 'I suppose I've as much right to be here as you have. Anyhow, I'm your wife, and I mean to stick to you while you've got anything to stick to.'

'And who's that, I should like to know?' he asked, pointing his whip at Cummings, who, with less effrontery than Mrs. Redmond, was still sitting in the background, waiting for his introduction.

'That's Cummings. He's a pal, and he's standing in with us. We've been saving up to come to see you, and it took all we had to get to Knaresboro'. We've walked over——'

'More fools you!' said Redmond, with a sickly grin.

'We didn't know you were there, beauty, with that lovely trap,' retorted the lady.

'Well, you've come over here for nothing, and you'll have to walk back with nothing.'

'We know a trick worth two of that—don't we, Cummings?'

Thus addressed, Cummings rose from the parapet, and, coming forward, said:

'We've come here for business. Snacks and back answers won't get us on to a pleasant understanding. If the governor will listen to reason, I'm agreeable to explain my views on the subject, and come to terms with him; if he won't, I shall do the best I can on the other side. But we don't want any bullying, you understand,' he added, with a significant nod.

'What the devil have you got to do with my affairs?' asked Redmond.

'What the devil have I got to do with it?' exclaimed Cummings, losing his temper at once—he and his partner were both irritable and touchy with their long, dry walk—'well, I think I've had a pretty good lot to do with it, one way and another. I've lost the best situation a man could wish for; I've risked my neck twice, spent all my savings, parted with my last shilling to bring your missis down here—without which she'd never have come; I've done five miles of a damned dusty road, sat jogging my heels here waiting for you for over an hour, and got a back answer the moment I spoke a civil word: if that ain't enough to do in your interests, I should like to know what you would have.'

'Who asked you to do anything?'

'That's neither here nor there,' chimed in Mrs. Redmond. 'We've each of us had a turn at the job, and we're going to stand in equal for anything that's to be got out of it.'

'Oh, I know what you've been at. Nichols has told me. You've bungled the job all round. You've wasted your chances, and you've lost your money, and you expect me to repay you. You've come down here as a last resource, in fact.'

Both Mrs. Redmond and her partner agreed with a ready nod to this last statement of the case.

'And you want a share in whatever I've got—is that it?'

They acquiesced again with perfect unanimity.

'Wait a bit,' said Redmond, jerking the reins, and giving the pony a cut with his broken whip.

As he disappeared with the pony and cart through the gateway, Mrs. Redmond and Cummings, exchanging a glance of intelligence, descended the terrace steps sharply, and followed through the gateway. They

suspected some treacherous manœuvre on the part of Redmond, but he had gone simply to put up the pony in the court. They were repaid, however, for their caution, by discovering the whisky and provisions in the cart—much to Redmond's disgust, for he had hoped to save this brand from the burning—and they helped to carry the goods into the house, when Redmond unlocked the door of the gate-house.

'There,' said Redmond, when they reached his filthy room, 'that is all I have to share.'

'Well, we'll begin on the victuals and drink,' said Mrs. Redmond.

Redmond could not prevent that; but he sat with his hands in his pockets, scowling at them in sullen silence, as they ate and drank with greedy voracity the things he had provided for himself out of that unlucky wheelwright's money.

'Now, then,' said Cummings, when his

cravings were appeased, 'let's have a pipe and a glass of whisky, and come to business.'

'I don't drink at this time of the day,' growled Redmond.

'I do,' said Mrs. Redmond, helping herself largely to the whisky.

'We're agreed,' said Cummings, striking a match on his leg, 'to go shares. Now, Mr. Redmond'—taking a pull at his pipe—'what's the assets?'

He was quite in a cheerful frame of mind by this time.

'I've got nothing in the world but what you see in this room,' said Redmond.

'Humbug!' said Cummings sententiously, striking another match.

'Rot!' said Mrs. Redmond, setting down her glass.

'You're at liberty to search the place, if you like. Why don't you?'

'Oh! we don't intend to give ourselves

any trouble about it,' said Cummings, thrusting his hands in his pockets, and spreading himself out with growing confidence. 'We've picked up a little information from the men at work in the park. Information that Dr. Meredith and the people on the other side would pay handsomely for.'

'That's it,' said Mrs. Redmond; 'and we shall sell to the highest bidder.'

'Oh, that's your game, is it?' muttered Redmond between his set teeth.

'It is,' said Cummings, calmly looking up at the smoke wreathing over his head.

'You can't get blood out of a gate-post,' Redmond said, after a pause. 'I tell you I've got no more than you see here.'

'Jim, you always were a liar,' his wife said; 'you know you were.'

'And a fool as well, if he couldn't invent anything better than that to take you in with,' Cummings chimed in.

'Jim, are you going to act square?' asked Mrs. Redmond, waxing impatient.

'I'm not going to be bullied. You won't frighten me, though you have brought a man to back you up. I know you. You're as cursed a coward as ever drew breath. You wouldn't have dared to come here without him. You've brought him, thinking to have me on the bounce.'

'She brought me because she couldn't leave me behind—because she hadn't enough to bring her down alone,' said Cummings. 'Never mind that. Let's stick to business. Now, then, about this timber. From what we picked up as to the value of trees, and a rough calculation as to the number you've cut down, it's pretty clear that the sum realized runs into four figures. Where is it?'

'Where is it?' cried Redmond, exasperated to think that the money was not in his possession. 'Why, here it is,' and pulling

out his notebook, he showed the rough account he kept there of money owing, and made it clear, rather by his manner than the statement of facts, that he could not get the debtors to pay. His vehement indignation was real. He even went so far as to own to the extortion of a trifle from the wheelwright that morning.

'Well, if the money has not come in yet, we must wait till it does,' said Mrs. Redmond, refilling her glass. 'I can make myself comfortable here.'

'We shall soon find out whether you are telling the truth or not,' said Cummings. 'I shall stroll over to Knaresboro' to-morrow, and make inquiries.'

'Oh, will you?'

'Yes, I shall.'

Redmond looked at the disreputable pair with savage chagrin. He surmised rightly that the general reluctance to pay now was

based upon the hope of not having to pay at all. The rumour he knew had got about that the timber was not his to sell—that he was in difficulties which would oblige him soon to bolt. He was aware that his own poverty-stricken appearance encouraged the belief, and strengthened the debtors in their determination to withhold payment as long as possible. The presence of two other needy wretches at the Towers must make matters worse. And if this Cummings, with his blotchy face and threadbare, clerical costume (looking half prize-fighter, half ranter), carried out his threat of making inquiries at Lullingford, all hope of getting money—even from the wheelwright—would be at an end. If they refused point-blank to pay, he could not force them to do so. It was not in his power to take out County Court summonses against them.

'Of course, if you are telling the truth, we

shall have to stay on till the money does come in,' continued Cummings.

'Yes; that's all very well,' said Mrs. Redmond; 'but we mustn't let the grass grow under our feet. If that thing gets blown, we shall have to hook it sharp—all three of us. And it may get blown at any moment.'

'That's clear enough,' said Redmond.

'We must get the money in at once.'

'Easier said than done.'

'Oh, is it?' said Mrs. Redmond with a sniff and a toss of her head. 'You shall see. These fellows want a woman to talk to 'em. Men are no good at that game. I'll go round to 'em, and let 'em have it straight. They won't find me taking No for an answer.'

Redmond turned away in mute dismay. He took part no further in their discussion, which grew more animated as they dipped deeper and deeper into the stone jar of whisky;

but sat with his elbows on his knees and his chin in his hands, watching them with malignant hatred. They drank on until they became quarrelsome, and Redmond fostered the hope that they might end with a fight, in which one might mortally injure the other; but they drank on still, and became maudlin and imbecile. They drank more and more, insatiable with long-forced abstinence, and their speech grew thick and incoherent, and their hands became scarcely steady enough to refill their glasses.

Then Redmond, watching them, began to bite his nails, while a thousand pleasing possibilities revolved in his mind. So many accidents might happen to wretches besotted with drink as they were; and some of these accidents might be fatal to both. The merest trifle, like the movement of the hand, might lead to such an accident. As this thought occurred to him, he raised his head, yet still

gnawing his nails at the quick, and looked round the room in eager search of the trifle that was to rid him of these two who threatened to ruin his last chance of success.

CHAPTER LI.

Redmond's eye fell upon the lock of the door, and dwelt there. The key had been lost, and to secure it when he left the house he adopted a simple expedient: he removed the screw that fastened the knob to the spindle of the handle on the inside, so that when the door was closed, by withdrawing the spindle on the outside, he could practically leave the room secure against any inquisitive intruder who visited the house in his absence. This saved him the trouble of fastening windows and doors below whenever he chose to go out. The precaution was taken because of the workmen engaged in cutting timber near the house. As he looked at the door now, he

thought how easy it would be to imprison his visitors in the room by just going out and withdrawing the spindle from the closed door. Of course, in the natural order of things, they could eventually find means to unlock the bolt; but it would take them a long while to find a square instrument that would fit the place of the spindle, and in that time a good deal might happen.

His eye, wandering from the door, fell upon the window. The light was fading; it would soon be dark. The window looked on to the court. That was paved with cobble stones. The room was on the second floor. A man throwing himself from the window must inevitably smash his skull or break his back.

His wandering glance was next attracted by the unlit lamp on the chimney-piece. It wanted filling. Following a natural sequence of ideas, he looked into the corner of the

room where he kept his stores, and distinguished among the miscellaneous objects the can of paraffin.

With a gulp of feverish interest he turned his attention to the man and woman at the table. Cummings had a clay pipe in his mouth ; his head wobbled heavily from side to side, and he was rubbing up a screw of tobacco between his palms. Mrs. Redmond's arms were folded on the table ; her face rested on this pillow, and she yawned incessantly. Her bonnet was on the floor ; her frouzy hair fell in clotted wisps over her shoulder.

Redmond's temples throbbed with excitement ; he felt the necessity of movement and fresh air. He rose and left the room, feeling the loose door-handle as he passed. His going was an occasion for his visitors to fill up again and wish each other good-luck.

There was perfect stillness out on the terrace. Not a sound came from the sombre

park. Redmond crossed the open space, and walked down the avenue till he came to the part where the woodmen had been at work. They were gone now; the avenue was deserted, and ghostly in the fading twilight and perfect silence.

As he returned to the house, he heard Cummings singing with a droning voice, and when he ceased a hoarse burst of laughter from his wife. On the threshold he paused and looked round him once more with vague apprehension. Then, overcoming his irresolution, he turned and ran upstairs two steps at a time. Mrs. Redmond and Cummings were disputing again, gibbering idiotically across the table at each other.

They appealed to Redmond. His wife said with an absurd assumption of dignity that she was a respectable married woman, and wanted to go to bed. Cummings didn't care what she or anyone else said; he did not intend to

go out of that room, and the bed there was quite good enough for him. Mrs. Redmond asked if he expected her to catch a rheumatic fever by sleeping in one of the damp rooms ; and he retorted that she might catch what she liked, but she wouldn't catch him sleeping in any room but that. The dispute might have continued until both fell asleep on the table before them, but that Redmond hit upon an expedient to satisfy both parties. Going to the old-fashioned four-posted bedstead at the end of the room, he stripped off the clothes, dragged the feather bed and woollen mattress on to the floor, and throwing the bed on one side of the table and the mattress on the other, said :

'There's a bed for each of you ; there are the pillows for one and the bolster for the other. You can have the clothes as well. Now, then, turn in and make yourselves comfortable while there's light to see, for I've got no candles.'

Cummings acted on the suggestion at once. As a respectable married woman Mrs. Redmond still held out; but the snore of Cummings on the other side of the table, the perfect silence of Redmond, and the deepening gloom at length overcame her scruples, and she rolled from her chair and stretched herself out on the mattress.

Redmond, sitting in the dark on the paillasse, which still remained on the bedstead, opened his penknife and slowly ripped up the tick covering from end to end. By the time this was done, Mrs. Redmond snored in harmony with Cummings. Redmond rose, and feeling his way carefully, reached the chimney-piece. With equal caution he removed the glass from the lamp and lit the wick, lowering it so that the glimmer was only sufficient to reveal the sleepers and enable him to make his way about the room. Crossing noiselessly, he softly turned the

handle, and opened the door a couple of feet ; then he removed the knob from the spindle and put it in his pocket. From the door he worked his way round to the bedstead again, and putting his hand through the slit tick, grasped a handful of straw and slowly drew it out ; then another and another, until he had as much as he could carry under his arm, and this he took across to the bed where his wife lay and put it down by her head. He returned to the paillasse and drew out another armful, which he disposed at the back of Cummings. Patiently, stealthily, he went to and fro between the bedstead and the besotted sleepers until he had drawn out three parts of the straw from the paillasse and piled it up around his wife and Cummings. He paused and drew a long breath as he surveyed this preparation ; then he took the whisky jar, poured out a glassful, and having gulped it down, slowly emptied the jar on the piled-

up straw, distributing it equally about both sleepers. Once his wife turned while he stood close beside her with the jar in his hand, causing him to hold his breath with apprehension of discovery, but she only opened and closed her clammy lips once or twice, and then snored again.

He put the jar out of his hand hurriedly, and fetched the can of paraffin from the corner. It was nearly full; there was more than he needed; but he emptied it, to do the work completely, soaking both the bed and the mattress on which his wife and Cummings were stretched. Now all was ready, and there was no time to hesitate. The smell of the paraffin might alarm and arouse them if either awoke. He fetched the lamp from the chimney, glanced across the table to be sure that the door stood open ready for his escape, stooped down, and whipping off the chimney, set the flame to the straw that surrounded his wife.

He had reckoned on the straw lighting gradually and on setting fire to the pile in several places, but it blazed up with a rapidity that upset his calculations. In an instant it seemed that the whole mass of saturated straw was one sheet of flame, leaping up to the ceiling and blinding him with its glare. Dropping the lamp, he dashed round the table and made for the door. The whisky jar stood in his way where he had left it; he struck his foot violently against it and stumbled, knocking it over. It rolled, and stumbling once more against it, he fell forward against the half-open door. It shut to with a bang; but above the crash his ear caught the appalling ring of the handle jerked out by the shock, as it fell upon the floor outside. With bristling horror he put his hand upon the lock; the spindle was gone—there was no means of opening the door.

And now, turning to the blazing pile with the last hope that there might yet be time to stamp out the flames, he saw two shadowy figures struggling in the midst of the column of fire, while their shrieks rose above the hollow roar of the raging flames, which no effort of his or theirs could now extinguish. From the feathers and wool dense clouds of choking smoke rolled out and walled in the blazing mass. Long tongues of creeping fire marked where the spirit had spread and streamed out over the carpeted floor. Redmond retreated as they crept towards him like a vengeance, bending down to gasp for air. But there was no air ; the fire had sucked it up and was growing dull for want of it. His wife and Cummings had ceased to shriek ; the smoke stifled their cries, but he saw them groping in the smoke, their figures marked out by the red smouldering patches on their burning clothes.

Suddenly there was a crash of glass. Cummings had found the window and torn the glass and sashes out with his hand in the frantic need of air. But with the inrush of air the flames burst up with fresh energy, wreathing the ceiling and curling out through the broken window to lick the air, enveloping the wretch who hung stupefied and powerless over the sill. With one deep groan, Mrs. Redmond fell forward on the ground. The flames were at Redmond's feet. He opened his mouth and gasped ; the fire seemed to penetrate to his very soul. He threw up his arms, reeled forward, and dropped with a thud. After that there was no other sound but the roar of the flames, the crackling of wood, and the fall of glass and plaster.

CHAPTER LII.

To shield herself, Nessa had declared that Anderson was her brother, not knowing that he actually possessed a sister, believing that the disease which had deprived him of memory would be a safeguard against the discovery of her falsehood. By her own consent to the operation, she had abandoned her safeguard; and now that memory was restored, Anderson had asked to see his sister, and she was called upon to face him.

Overwhelmed by shame, remorse, and despair, she was powerless to make any effort of self-defence. She felt that the end was come, her last resource gone, and that there was no alternative but to submit to the

current of events and to be swept helpless and hopeless into the wide sea where lost souls sink.

Almost without consciousness she accompanied Sweyn into the room where the two doctors waited with Anderson to test the extent of his recovery by this experiment. She stood before them cold and white and motionless as a statue, with the dead feeling in her heart of the criminal brought up for judgment who knows the fate awaiting him.

The two doctors rose. It was the first time they had met Nessa. Sweyn, with deep anxiety in his face, hurried through the form of introducing her.

'My wife, Dr. Hewet, Dr. Channing,' he said, taking Nessa's hand and keeping it in his.

Her cold hand did not respond to his pressure; she made no sign of understanding, but stood immovable before Anderson, waiting for him to recognise her as his wife.

'Is this your sister?' Sweyn asked, anxious to get the scene over and relieve Nessa.

Anderson took time to consider, and then, shaking his head, said:

'No, that is not my sister. Elsie is fair, not dark; she is shorter, and not handsome. This is not my sister.'

'Are you sure?'

'Quite sure.'

'Remember, it is some time since you saw your sister—she may have altered,' suggested Dr. Hewet.

'It is impossible that she could alter like that. She is older than I am; that lady is younger; she is not my sister.'

'Then you do not know this lady?'

'I am not sure,' Anderson said slowly. 'And yet I think——'

He paused.

Dr. Channing interposed, seeing the intense anxiety in Sweyn's face as he watched Nessa.

'We are taxing Mrs. Meredith too much——' he began.

But Nessa stopped him with an impatient movement of her hand.

'If you remember me,' she said to Anderson in a clear, low voice, 'tell all you know.'

'I cannot remember all,' Anderson said; 'yet something floats in my mind as I look at you——'

'Is it not possible that you had two sisters — another besides Elsie?' suggested Dr. Hewet.

'Ah, that must be it!' Anderson said quickly. 'Let me think.' He was silent a moment; then, with awakening recollection, he continued: 'Yes, I remember; before I went to sea, a lad, my mother gave birth to a child. I see the little one in its nurse's arms —before I ran away from home—a long while ago—in the time that is most clear to me.'

'The time before your accident?' said

Channing; 'that is ten years ago. Mrs. Meredith could not then have been more than eight or nine—quite a child.'

'Then she must be my sister.'

Turning to Nessa, the doctor explained that most of the events that had occurred since his accident had failed to leave any impression on Anderson's mind, and would probably never be recalled. Then, as Nessa was seized with a sudden tremor on hearing this, he cast a glance at Sweyn signifying the advisability of terminating the painful scene.

Sweyn led her back to her room, making no comment on what had passed—saying, indeed, scarcely half a dozen words. In her room Nessa sank into a chair and bowed her head, speechless with conflicting emotions. Sweyn stood by the door a moment, looking back at her in pity, and then left the room without speaking.

Almost before the door closed, Nessa started

to her feet, resolved to take the course shaped by her conscience. The interview had for awhile restored her hope of evasion. It had been recognised that she might be Anderson's sister ; the danger of his recognising her as his wife was removed by the fact that he could never recall the events of the late past. But though the opening of escape was offered her, she would not accept it. She could not live a life of falsehood with the man she loved. She had thought it possible : the agony of these past days had proved to her that it was impossible. She must tell him all and go her way.

From her wardrobe she took down the plain black dress, the plain bonnet and jacket she had worn in her situation at the Palace when Sweyn found her there, and which she had kept for the sake of dear associations. She laid aside her afternoon gown and put these on. Then she drew off the bracelets from her wrists and the rings from her fingers

—all save her wedding ring—and put them in the jewel case Sweyn had given her. At the bottom of the box were the pages on which she had written her 'Confession' to Sweyn. Should she leave them there with her trinkets for him to read one day when she was no more? No. She would do nothing now to retain the love she had forfeited. She would take them away with her that he might the sooner forget her. When all her preparations were made, she looked round the room once more, and biting her quivering lips, choking down the passionate grief that rose from her soul, she turned hastily away.

The three doctors went downstairs, and sat talking about the case for ten minutes; then Hewet and Channing left, and Sweyn, going into his study, threw himself in his chair and waited.

It was not long before the door opened and Nessa came in, as he expected she would.

'I want to speak to you, Sweyn, if you can give me a little time,' she said, standing half-way between the door and him.

'All my time is yours,' he answered, setting a chair for her.

She sat down, fearing her strength would fail, and after a moment's silence said :

'I have done you a grievous wrong, and I have come here to make what reparation remains possible to me. I have been selfish and ungenerous to you who have given me so much,' she faltered.

An irresistible impulse led Sweyn to lay his hand upon her arm. She had not the force to resist his touch.

'You would not touch me if you knew all,' she continued in faltering tones. 'You will shrink from me, you must despise me, when I tell you what I am.'

'I am waiting to hear ; tell me quickly,' he said.

'Sweyn, I am not that man's sister! I am not your wife! I am his!'

'God be praised for this!' murmured Sweyn fervently. 'I have been waiting to hear you tell me this: waiting with the sure conviction that your dear soul would triumph in the end. Without that conviction I could not have let you suffer in secret through the long hours of night and day that have passed since I learnt all. But I would not rob you, darling, of your triumph: I would not deprive myself of this great joy.' He rose to his feet and cried in pride, 'Now I can say my wife is honest: she cannot wrong me.'

'I do not understand,' Nessa exclaimed, in perplexity.

'Now that my tongue is free to speak, you shall know quickly, my dear love. I know all. I have seen Anderson's keeper, Hexham. Three days ago he made it clear to me that you were not Anderson's sister. In tracing

Anderson with the help of the police, the villainous plot against you was discovered. This morning the whole case was laid before me by the man employed by Hexham—a man named Griffiths, who already knew something of your history.'

'But if you know so much you must know that I am not your wife!'

'I know that you *are* my wife. You are mine, and not Anderson's. That was no marriage. If he had been free to make you his wife, such a marriage as that could be annulled. But he was not free. He was already married, and his wife still lives!'

'Oh, this mercy is more than I deserve!' cried Nessa in trembling gratitude as she sank to her knees.

Sweyn raised her in his arms, and folding her to his breast said:

'More than you deserve, beloved darling—

no! You have fallen into error and made atonement—sinned and repented. You have triumphed over yourself, and there should be joy in heaven now over your victory!'

THE END

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